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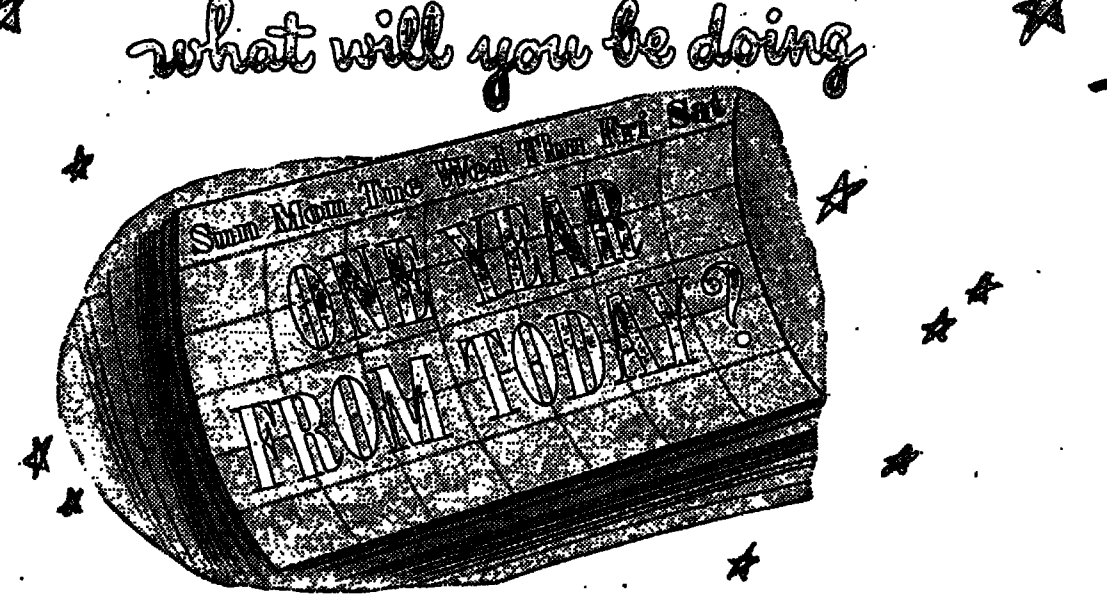

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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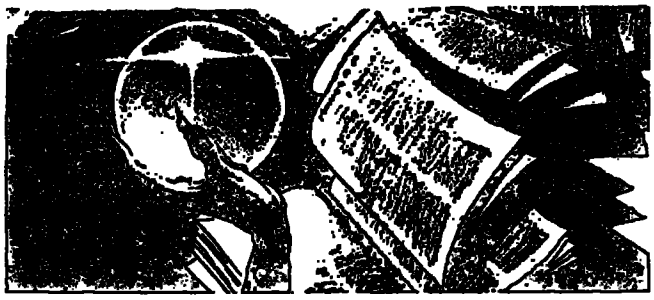

OF THINGS BEYOND

A. M. PHILLIPS' gnomes, in "The Mislaid Charm" this issue, interested me personally enough to make me try to look up just what properties the gnomes were supposed to have in folklore. Two phases of that minor research surprised me. First, it was surprisingly difficult to ferret out any information on the subject, and second, *gnome* is not, properly speaking, the correct name for the little men. Neither is *dwarf*—for all of Walt Disney and Snow White.

They were invented—or discovered—by the German miners before 1000 A.D., and known as *kobalds* or *nickels*. They were, in their mythological function, a blended personification of the perversity of inanimate objects and the not-too-gentle good humor of the people who created the tales about them. If mine tunnels insisted on flooding, why, evidently, the nickels were at work, protesting this human invasion of their realm. If a pick vanished down a crack, and hid just out of reach, obviously a kobald had taken it.

Although many times the terms *kobald* and *nickle* were used interchangeably, any well-versed miner could explain that a kobald was an earth-spirit found anywhere underground, in mountain or dirt. A nickel on the other hand, appeared only where underground water was to be found. It was the nickels that flooded mines. They, too, were the ones that sometimes transmuted iron into copper. In their hatred of men's hard iron tools, their underground waters in copper mines would transmute them to soft copper—at least on the surface, if left overnight. They'll even do it today, if you dip an iron tool into a solution of a copper salt, though it's called electro-deposition by replacement of ions, now.

The miners of that day were an even hardier and more horny-fisted gang than the present-day breed. They had to be, when ventilation systems, machine pumps, and blasting were still in the future. They had a tendency to think it a great good joke if A succeeded in making B drop a ten-foot beam on his toes. The kobalds, taking over something of this jolly spirit, added to it with their supernatural powers. Nature being completely unpredictable, and the perversity of objects so

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remarkably great, it was evident that kobalds and nickels were beings of highly uncertain temper, and given to mighty rages.

Paracelsus, a middle-ages chemist-of-all-work, is said to have originated—or acquired somewhere and popularized—the term *gnome* for these little men of unpleasant temper and horny, if corny, practical jokes. His training in chemistry came from mining work—on the refining end—and medicine, which paid better. He was very successful in the latter, incidentally, because he knew so little about it. He was original in that; most doctors of the day knew a great deal, ninety-nine percent wrong.

But the gnome was still the kobald or nickel; a little dwarfish fellow, usually dressed in brown or gray, with a long beard, a peaked cap, and turned up toes on his shoes. His uncertain temper and uncertain practical joking covered an essentially stupid nature. Properly handled, he could be tricked or cajoled into doing favors—as Nature can.

They were marvelous metal-smiths, hardworking, diligent miners, the spirits of earth and mountain and subterranean streams. Naturally such efficient miners as they had accumulated enormous hordes of gold, silver and jewels which they guarded zealously with curse and charm. Not satisfied with that, they were forever trying to stop man's efforts to extract any mineral they hadn't, themselves, gotten 'round to yet. They could magically dull chisel and pick, or charm a tool so that it invariably slipped and attacked its wielder. With the poor tools available to the miners of the time, a bit of exceptionally hard rock would provide plenty of proof for that.

The original names of the spirits of mountain and earth remain in scientific language today, thanks to one of the meanest tricks those old crusty-tempered beings played. Any ancient miner could tell you of the things they did to copper ore. Copper, a semiprecious metal, was found in its ores, mined laboriously, and smelted by traditional, rule-of-thumb methods. Wherever any quantity of the bluish-green copper ores were found, small smelting plants and mines were set up. But, ah, those tricky kobalds and nickels! They charmed many good deposits to make it impossible to smelt the ore, even after the miners had laboriously carved it out of the mountains.

Kobald-kupfer and *nickel-kupfer,* as the result was known, was found in scattered places all through central Europe. It was bluish-green, only very slightly different from the bluish-green copper ores in structure, but no copper smelter, no matter how expert or how diligently he worked, could get so much as a drop of *kupfer* metal from it. Unfortunately, cobalt and nickel metal ores simply will not reduce to the steel-white, tough metals under the smelting conditions that will separate copper from its very similar ores.

THE EDITOR.

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I Jumped My Pay from $18 to $50 a Week!

Here's how I did it

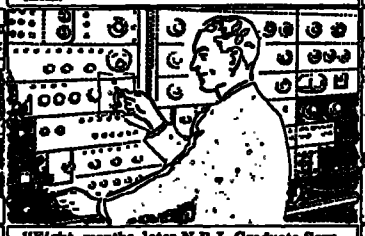
by J. E. S.

(NAME AND ADDRESS GIVEN UPON REQUEST)

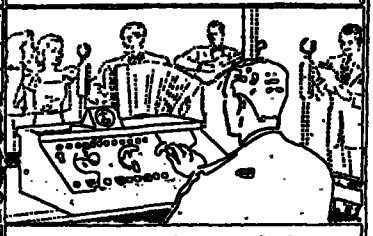
"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory." He'd probably be there today if he hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them.

"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."

"When I finished training I accepted a job as Radio serviceman. In three weeks I was made service manager at $40 to $50 a week, more than twice my shoe factory pay."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Graduate Service Department sent me to Station KWCR where I became Radio Operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI and connected with Television Station WOXR."



"N.R.I. training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio has enjoyed a colorful past. It will enjoy an even greater future."

J. E. SMITH, President
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Find out today how I Train You at Home to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

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Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio; Loudspeaker Systems, Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

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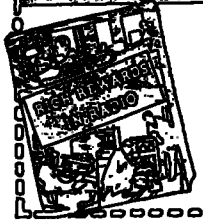

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The Mislaid Charm

by A. M. PHILLIPS

Concerning what happened when a Pennsylvania gnome stole his tribal charm—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

"Hey! Pickett! Mail!" bawled Mrs. Henderson, from the foot of the stairs. She also pounded the wall with an elephantine fist, and yelled again.

Henry Pickett, as he rolled off the bed, wondered again, and with amazement, who had built this house, and with what, that it could so long withstand the occupancy and the unintentional wrecking activities of his landlady. She was like a huge human bumblebee, Mrs. Henderson was; as noisy and as clumsy, and something of the same shape. She also existed under a lifelong misconception—she thought everyone else was deaf.

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She was waiting for him as he went down the stairs, and that was an ominous sign.

"You ain't payin' no bills till you pay me!" she informed him, and wiped her short black mustache with the back of a hand as she handed him the letter.

"It's just an advertisement or something," said Pickett, mildly.

"Well, how about my money?"

"I'm expecting a check, Mrs. Henderson—"

"That yarn's worn out! And I ain't heard no typewritin' today. If you're just gonna lay up there on your skinny—"

"Now, Mrs. Henderson," Pickett expostulated hurriedly, retreating up the stairs, "I'm working, honest I am! I've been plotting today—working with a pencil—"

"That's a lotta hogwash!" Mrs. Henderson's voice rose in volume as Pickett ascended the steps. When he reached the landing, the door to his room was vibrating in sympathy. "I heard the bed springs squeaking! Now listen here, Pickett—"

He closed the door, but failed utterly to exclude the last few admonitions she had to offer. Under cover of this uproar he got back on the bed, and enjoyed a mild sense of pleasure when he heard her trip over a chair on her way back to the kitchen, and curse roundly and with feeling. The sound gradually worked its way into the farther reaches of the big old house, and so was muffled at last to a beelike rumble.

Henry Pickett lay back on the old army blanket that covered his bed, propping his head against a bedpost so he might watch the square of bright October sunlight that was exploring intimately the texture and design of the faded, worn old rug. There was a spot there that would soon be through. The frayed, raveled threads were delicate, and very individual in the sharp sunlight.

His room was large and clean and old. The wallpaper was faded to a pale, neutral color, that was for Pickett forever nameless. Although cracked in places, and showing two stains in the ceiling—memorials to ancient difficulties with the plumbing—it was brushed and dusted. One of Mrs. Henderson's virtues was a bitter enmity for dirt.

The two large, low-silled window frames were painted white, and gave the room an antique and a colonial appearance.

This house had been a mansion in colonial times. Washington had visited here, they said. Pickett lay back, considering the changes time can make, and watching a chimney swift that darted and chittered in the bright air outside.

"Work!" ordered his conscience, in complete agreement with Mrs. Henderson. The typewriter, on its little table against the wall between the windows, stared at him with a mute, reproachful urgency. Pickett dodged his conscience with the ease of long experience, and refused to meet the typewriter's eye.

He felt the shape of the letter, partly crumpled under him, and slowly

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disengaged it from between his body and the bed. It was nothing, probably. The second delivery never brought anything but advertisements. He looked at it, then scrambled wildly to get off the bed.

The superscription in the upper corner of the envelope read "Burk & McHavery, Publishers, Inc."

Pickett got on his feet and stared at it. It was a small, personal-looking envelope—not eight and a half inches long, like a business letter. And it had his name on it: Mr. Henry A. Pickett, 520 Jefferson Square.

Two months ago Pickett had sent them something! He pulled his manuscript journal from its place on the top shelf of the bookcase, and flipped it open to the "Out" section. It was a loose-leaf notebook in which each of his finished manuscripts had a page. When a manuscript was "out" its page went in one section; when "in," in another; when and if it was at last sold it went in a third section proudly labeled "Roster of the Victorious."

There was at present only one lonely sheet in the Out Department. But the number of words that made up the manuscript, noted on the upper corner of the page, ran into the tens of thousands!

Pickett's hands were shaking as he sat breathlessly down in a wicker chair by a window. They didn't usually send him personal letters when rejecting a manuscript! But then, this was a lot of words, and once before—

"Open it!" Pickett advised himself. He followed his own advice, and read:

My dear Mr. Pickett:

I am terribly sorry about the delay on your story—rather unusual, and requiring careful consideration—entire staff has had several consultations—

However, I am glad to tell you that we are arranging for its publication.

(Its publication, its publication, repeated Pickett's mind, drowning out everything else.)

A check will be sent forward this week, which I hope will compensate somewhat for the delay.

Sincerely,
Edward R. Burk

cb/erb

"A check will be sent forward this week" emerged with such tremendous import and blinding clarity that it wiped out the first part of the letter entirely.

Pickett carefully placed the letter on the table by the typewriter, and went back to the bed. He had an idea that if he didn't lie down he'd fall down.

"A check will be . . . this week. A check—" What did the rest of the letter say? "—rather unusual—"

The stunned feeling was leaving Pickett. He bounced off the bed, read the letter through completely again, walked around the room, and remembered none of it.

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The sunlight, he noted with a detached, scientific interest, had acquired a new quality—it was brighter, more pregnant with the rich color of October. It registered a deeper impression on his senses. The sky outside his windows was more intensely, purely blue.

He made the circuit of the room again, reread his letter, and retained a clear impression this time of "cb/erb," at the bottom. Damn it! Why couldn't the man keep a decent typewriter in his office! But when he looked at the letter again, the typing seemed clear enough. He wondered irrelevantly who "cb" was—whether a man or a woman.

The immediate need to do something led Pickett to turn on the little radio by his bed, and he was astonished to discover that music, along with the sunlight, had been stepped-up in quality! It was poignant, and achingly sweet, and as stirring as the voice of a master orchestra, heard in person.

Mrs. Henderson terminated these researches by unceremoniously bursting open the door and demanding to know what was the matter.

"What's all this?" she asked. Her little, pale-blue eyes, ridiculously tiny in that round and fat, but solid and uncompromising face, were bitterly suspicious. "'Ave you gone nuts? What're you doin', anyway—starting a dance marathon?"

Her lanky and somewhat frazzled-looking boarder waltzed toward her, holding out the letter. The strange weakness in his knees, he was glad to note, had vanished.

"Here, read this, Mrs. Henderson," babbled Pickett, "read it out loud!"

Mrs. Henderson took the letter and read it in severe silence. "It's damn near time," she told him without excitement, and handed the letter back.

"But what does it say?"

"It says there's a check comin'. And don't you forget what you owe me when it gets here! But you needn't worry about forgetting that," she added, and Pickett was sure he wouldn't. "Now if I was you, I'd get right to work an'—"

"No!" howled Pickett, in rebellion. "No, no! I couldn't concentrate now! I couldn't! Besides, it's late. I'm going out for dinner tonight; I'm going to celebrate! So I'll want a bath and a shave—"

"Somebody invite you to dinner?" Mrs. Henderson folded thick arms and studied him.

"No. I'll go to a hotel, or a restaurant—"

"An' where'll you get the money?"

The floor was once more solid under Pickett's feet. "That's so," he said blankly. There was a moment's silence. Then Pickett's gaze fastened on Mrs. Henderson, and a light came into his eyes.

"No!" she roared, and the windows rattled.

"Just a couple of dollars! The check's coming! You know that, Mrs. Henderson! You'll be the first person I'll pay—"

"You're right I will! There's your board and lodging, and that ain't all by no means! I paid the return charge to the express company for a manu-

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script last week! And how much have you already hit me for, huh? I got it all writ down, and don't you think I ain't! I got it right here, and I'll read it to you!"

He got a dollar and a half, but not before the old lady living on a pension on the third floor had hurried downstairs under the impression that the house was on fire.

TWO HOURS later Pickett stood on the white marble steps, under the colonial fanlight of the doorway. Golden evening sunlight lay almost level along Jefferson Square, which stretched its dignified but seedy length east and west. The macadam reflected it blindingly, and passing pleasure cars were burnished and dazzling with it.

He himself was polished and scrubbed and shaved. His dark-brown hair was combed, and his sober-blue woolen suit, carefully conserved and worn infrequently, was neat and spotless. His glasses winked with sudden, chance-caught reflections, and his long, gaunt jaw, freshly and closely shaven, had a shiny, lacquered appearance.

The evening was his, and he had a buck and a half. He strolled slowly west, because, going that way, he could stare into the ruddy light, and the purple mist of roofs under the orange ball of the sun. Dead leaves, dropped by the sycamores, danced past him, borne on the sharp October air. He drew long breaths, savoring the clarity and the tang of the air.

And he was hungry.

Where would he eat? There was the Beauvista House; he'd been in there once. It was all right. And there was the Jefferson Hotel: but he'd attended a banquet there and they served squab, and of all the damned, useless things to try to eat— Anyway, he wanted to go some place he'd never been; some place interesting, and different!

The London Grill! He'd never been there, and it had a reputation for fine food. He remembered a lobster dinner he'd seen advertised by the London Grill for $1.25. That, Pickett decided, was what he would have! Lobster! *That* would make this dinner and this day a special occasion!

Counting the tip, it would return him to dead level, but he was hungry, and he wanted lobster, and this was a day of days. Besides, by the end of the week, or the first part of next—

Well, he'd have to walk, so he might as well step out.

The London Grill was a back addition to one of the town's best hotels. Its entry was on a small back street, used mostly for truck delivery, and its greatest flow of business came at the noon hour, with the flux of the office crowds.

When Pickett entered it that evening it was practically empty. In spite of the bright orange light in the street it was dim in there, for bar, tables, chairs, and paneling were all of dark oak, and the only window was mullioned, in imitation of the classic English tavern. Dim yellow lamps dispelled little of the shadow.

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Pickett glanced at the bar along one wall, and went to one of the tables ranged along the other. Being very conscious of unfamiliarity with his surroundings, he moved too quickly, and seated himself with nervous haste. The lounging bartender, and the two, blond, costumed waitresses gave him hard, hostile stares.

One of them wearily brought him a glass of water and two menus, that differed in size.

"Got a special lobster dinner tonight," she announced indifferently. With one hand she adjusted her back hair, her eyes intent on vacancy; with the other she opened the smaller menu and spread it before him. To it was pinned a small tag that read: Lobster Special—90c. Pickett's heart leaped. More luck!

"I'll take that."

"And what'll you have to drink?" asked the ascetic waitress, after the surrounding details of the dinner had been established.

"I just told you—coffee," said Pickett, kindly. This poor girl should be let go home, to bed.

The "poor girl" dispelled this kindly human sympathy by rousing from her weariness long enough to direct upon him another of those hostile stares, this time faintly mixed with contempt.

"Ain't you havin' no cocktail?"

Pickett's embarrassment returned in a hot wave. "Er . . . oh, yes! Of course!" He gazed helplessly at the table until she opened the other, larger menu, which turned out to be a liquor list.

Another small tag was pinned to this. It read: Special Tonite—Barcardi Cocktail—30c.

"I'll take that."

She drifted away, with a slow, rhythmic hip movement.

Well, he was still inside his buck and a half, thought Pickett, and, besides, he was celebrating! He should have thought of a cocktail himself.

THE WAITRESS returned, left a glass full to the brim with a pink liquid, and floated away. Pickett raised the glass carefully to his lips, took a small sip, and was rather pleased with the taste. Pickett's experience with alcoholic beverages was very slight, being limited to an infrequent highball or cocktail pressed on him by someone else, and a glass or two of beer, which he didn't like. He regarded the drink with some suspicion. It tasted smooth and bland, and not at all intoxicating. Could you get drunk on just one of these things? He'd heard that if you sipped a drink it would affect you less, so he sipped quickly, like a man trying to cure the hiccups. He had no intention of getting drunk and missing this dinner!

At this point Pickett observed that a fat man at a neighboring table, who was well advanced along the stages of inebriation, was regarding him with owlish attention. Little puddles of liquid lay on the table before the fat man, but no glass was in evidence.

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"You don't have to hurry, bud," announced this gentleman. "'F you want it, y' can have it, I say, and what's more 'ul buy yu 'nother! Hey, Joe!" he called, turning to the observant but uncommunicative bartender; "another o' the same, and one f' mu friend here!"

Joe turned to his bottles, and Pickett hastily set down his glass. He was conscious of two things—bewilderment, and a little globe of heat that had suddenly appeared in his insides. He dismissed, in so far as was possible, the globe of heat, and devoted his attention to his stout acquaintance.

The fellow thought that he, Pickett, had stolen his drink! He was not sober, of course, and was mistaken. The waitress had brought this glass to Pickett. She would hardly have taken it from another customer, and furthermore, the glass had been full when he got it. But Pickett distinctly remembered, now that he thought of it, that the fat man had had a glass, and now there was none in sight on his table.

He leaned over and glanced under the tablecloths. The floor was bare, except for the fat man's feet, which did, indeed, occupy considerable floor space.

Pickett sat up in time to meet the stare of his waitress. She carried a fruit cup and a tall glass filled with a coppery liquor.

"'Djah drop somethin'?"

"Er . . . no." Pickett dismissed an impulse to explain the problem to her. She wouldn't, he felt, be either interested or sympathetic.

She set both her burdens before him, watching him meanwhile with more attentiveness than he thought she would have been able to summon.

The fat man was also watching him; and, when Pickett glanced in his direction, said, in his slow, thick voice: "Drink up, bud. Drink up, and we'll have another o' the same."

Pickett had a vague impression that not to drink with a fellow man was an insult of sorts, and might be followed by unpleasant consequences, particularly if the insulted one was already somewhat under the influence. So he reached for the tall glass. And found it gone. The fat man also observed this fact. Both of them looked under the tables. The bartender watched them, with no expression.

"Hey, Joe, I ordered another o' the same for mu friend here!"

"He got it." Pickett had never heard a human voice so utterly without color.

"Well, where is it?" demanded the fat man, reasonably.

"Ask him."

This advice was followed. Pickett confessed himself as ignorant of the disposition of the glass as the others.

"It'll be charged on your bill," said Joe, and the incident appeared to be, for him, satisfactorily concluded.

The fat man and Pickett, however, were more humanly curious. The waitress was brought into the discussion; a more thorough search was insti-

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gated; and a pale air of liveliness entered this quiet and dignified room. But the glass was not recovered.

The fat man, stirred with an obscure emotion, paid the bill and departed, after regarding Pickett for a full silent minute with eyes a trifle glazed.

Silence and peace stole back into the London Grill. Joe retired through a small door in the back of the bar, and the two waitresses still in the room leaned against the wall and chirruped soporifically, heads together.

Pickett got through the soup, during the consumption of which the globe of heat he held within him burst, and scattered embers all through his being.

The lobster Newberg arrived in its patty shell, along with a bottle of sherry, and the combined odors brought saliva and a renewed appetite.

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Pickett reached for his fork, and knocked over the tall glass, empty now, and with the print of small fingers on it.

He sprang out of his chair, staring at the glass, and the two waitresses stopped the noise they were making to look at him.

Pickett slowly reached out and picked the glass up. It was solid; and empty but for a few drops of the coppery liquor and a heady odor. Along the rim he saw prints resembling those of the lips of a child. Experimentally, he banged the glass down on the table. It made a solid and respectable thump.

Joe had returned now, and was in his accustomed place, arms akimbo on the bar. He added his blank stare to that of the two waitresses.

But Pickett was past caring. He sat down again, and studied the glass, the other empty tables, the two waitresses, and, concluding this review, Joe.

He was drunk! He was sure of it now. A glass that vanished, full, and reappeared, empty! Sadly he began on his lobster, and was somewhat cheered to discover that, drunk or not, he enjoyed it.

But Pickett wasn't drunk. He had a dinner guest, although he was unaware of it. Perhaps Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would have felt a prickling of the skin. An old Irish grandmother would certainly have been so fey and ticklish that she wouldn't have been able to sit still at all! And she would have recognized the proximity of the wee folk past any necessity to see them. One wee folk, to be exact. For, seated in the chair beside Pickett, and waiting without a great deal of patience for him to buy another drink, was Rivkin.

Rivkin resembled, excluding his face, one of Walt Disney's dwarfs; he wore baggy, brown, small clothes, soiled with earth, and he had a peaked cap with a long, pointed crown, that leaned backward. His shoes were leathery, and clung to his feet, taking their shape. The toes curled up into points.

But his face was that of a Cockney pickpocket. It was small and pinched and beardless, and its ordinary expression was one of sly malice. At present, it wore an aspect of sullen unease, and the malice was bolder and more alive. The close-set little black eyes rarely strayed long from one or another of the various doors to the room.

Realizing that he had picked a wrong horse, as far as drinks were concerned, Rivkin slipped off the chair, trotted across the aisle, and sprang nimbly onto the bar. Ignoring Joe, he leaped across the space between, and landed on the tier of shelves against the wall. For a moment he studied the bottles ranged along the shelves; then he waved his diminutive hand over a quart bottle labeled "Monongahela Rye," and snapped his fingers. The bottle, in so far as human vision was concerned, vanished. No one in the room noticed its going, or that there was a sudden, new vacancy among the ranks of bottles.

Rivkin gathered up the bottle and a glass, which he caused also to disappear, and returned to his seat beside Pickett. The pop of the cork as it

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was withdrawn brought Pickett's head up with a jerk, but disturbed Joe's Olympian calm not at all.

After a moment of startled, horselike listening, Pickett went on eating. Rivkin drank; and things, for a time, remained as is.

THEN the street door opened and a gaudily dressed young woman wearing a large straw hat entered, closely followed by another elf. Rivkin started, and knocked over his glass, and Pickett stared in utter disbelief at the small pool of clear liquid that appeared from nowhere to spread darkly across his table.

The young woman passed Pickett, glancing at him curiously, and went through another door to the main part of the hotel.

The elf discovered Rivkin and came forward. Rivkin had leaped from his chair, but after a moment's close scrutiny of the other, he made no further move. The newcomer was small, fat, and cheery-looking. His clothes were of the same pattern as Rivkin's, but were brushed and clean, and green in color instead of brown.

He halted before Rivkin, and, as he examined him, his round little face sparkled with excitement, and his eyes went wide.

"Say!" he ejaculated, in a reedy little whisper. "You must be the miner imp from upstate that swiped his community's charm!"

"So what?" asked Rivkin, leaning over and picking up a pick handle he had left beside his chair.

This exchange was completely inaudible to Pickett, who tentatively placed a finger in the little puddle before him. It was wet all right. He looked petulantly over at Joe, although he expected nothing from that rock-like man. Pickett was becoming conscious of a warm and rising resentment. The London Grill, he felt, was going altogether too far. He had come here for lobster, and novelty; and they gave him too little lobster and far too much novelty! He glared at Joe, and bit viciously into a roll.

"Tough guy, aren't you?" said the green-clad elf, backing away from Rivkin and his pick handle.

"Tough enough for you," replied Rivkin. "Who are you, anyway? A city elf, ain't you?"

"Do I look like a hayseed? I live under the library, and my name's Forringwood, if it's anything to you!"

"It ain't." Rivkin retrieved his glass and filled it again.

Forringwood watched him drink. "You won't be so tough pretty soon, if you're the guy that swiped the charm," he offered.

"What do you mean by that crack?" demanded Rivkin, his sharp little eyes alert.

"Just that the miner imp's little mob's in town—saw them a couple of blocks back. And are they steaming! There's an old guy named Van der Wisken that's the boss, and he's practically puffing smoke!"

At that Rivkin gave himself away completely. He leaped from his chair,

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and a fine sweat beaded his weaselish little face. His eyes darted from side to side, and he drew thin lips back in a ratlike snarl.

"So you *are* the guy!" observed Forringwood, with interest. "Boy, oh, boy, you better scram quick! They're working right across town."

"I suppose," snarled Rivkin, "you're all set now! Spill it to that old beer barrel Wisken where you seen me, hopin' he'll dump a load of diamonds in your lap! Well, if you knew him like I do—"

"I never saw you, pal!" Forringwood waved a magnanimous hand. "We all make these little mistakes now and then. I remember back in the old country one time: I got attached somehow to the lord mayor's jewels—But that's got nothing to do with this. You get a little distance behind you, and when the old guy shows up I'll treat him to a drink of my own brew down under the library. He won't be in such a hurry leaving when he tastes one of *my* jugs!"

Rivkin stuck out his little paw. "You're a right guy, and I won't forget it! Now, what would you like to have, before I beat it?"

"Not a thing, pal!"

"Come on!" snapped Rivkin. "I ain't got all day!"

"Well-ll, the Nottingham Pixies've got a secret recipe for a distillation that's reserved exclusive for Oberon and a few other regents. Now, I wouldn't mind—"

"It's yours!" Rivkin made a quick motion with one hand. He extended the same hand to Forringwood—before it had been empty; now it held an ancient piece of parchment closely inscribed with faded and minute Gothic lettering.

Forringwood snatched it avariciously, held it close to his nose, and studied the fine script. "By Hecuba!" he exclaimed admiringly, "it's perfect! Perfect! Damned if I blame you for swiping that charm!"

Rivkin bobbed his head. "Word for word. An' what's best, them pixies won't never know they lost it—that there's just a copy, and the original is still layin' wherever they keep it.

"There ain't nothing this charm can't do," he added sadly, "but bust this gang of dopes I swiped it off!" He glanced nervously at the door to the street. "Well, I gotta be goin'. See you again sometime."

Forringwood tucked the parchment into his blouse. "Finish your drink. You got time. They won't be here for a half-hour yet. And if I were you, I'd ditch that charm somewhere! It's red-hot! I've been hearing talk about it all over town!"

RIVKIN NODDED sadly. "I've been thinking the same thing. That old squarehead Wisken's tuned to this charm, or he can smell it! I ain't shook him off for more'n a day since I lit out of the mountains!" He thrust his own hand into his chest, which it entered easily and apparently unopposed. It went deep into his chest cavity—hand, cuff, and part of his arm.

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When he withdrew it there lay in the palm of his hand a tiny globe of light; soft, glowing, trembling.

This object was faintly visible even to Pickett, but—hardening as he was to the surprises that seemed a part of the dinner—he gave it no more than a glance, and went on eating.

"You want it?" asked Rivkin.

"'Sbones, no!" Forringwood drew back. "I'm not looking for trouble! Had plenty—more than my share! I'm satisfied now with a full jug, to keep me company nights when I sit in the library and read."

"I guess you're right." Rivkin tossed the pale ball of light in his hand, and glanced around the room. His gaze fixed on Pickett, who had finished dinner and was drinking his coffee. "This guy's a poor, spineless sort of yap. I'll give it to him!"

He twisted off his chair, walked around behind Pickett, and thrust light, hand and arm far into Pickett's body. When he withdrew it, his hand was empty. The action disturbed Pickett not at all, for he was completely unaware of it.

Forringwood skipped over to the bar shelves and returned with a bottle and a glass for himself.

"Try some of this Scotch, if you want to taste good whiskey, he offered, but Rivkin patriotically stuck to the distillation of his native earth.

They solemnly toasted each other. "To confusion to Wisken," said Forringwood, politely.

"To the pixies' recipe," replied Rivkin. They started together for the door.

"Wait," said Forringwood, with a giggle. "Let's start old bones here off on the right foot!"

He returned to the table, waited till Pickett's attention was elsewhere, and Joe had momentarily removed his stony gaze, then snapped his fingers over each of the bottles, and one glass. They instantly sprang into visibility. The second glass Forringwood returned to the shelf.

"I think I'll stick around a while, and see what happens," he told Rivkin. "And when Wisken gets here I'll shove him down under the library."

The door opened and two couples entered. Rivkin gave a last, longing look at Pickett, and, in exasperation, smacked the advancing shins of the first of the two ladies with his pick handle. She yelled, and whirled on her companions.

"Nix! Nix!" squeaked Forringwood, nervously. "Don't go socking people with that thing! Do you want a Committee on Psychic Research poking its nose around here?"

Rivkin grinned and slipped out the door.

PICKETT's attention was held by the acrimonious debate in progress by the door. When he returned it to his table he found himself staring at two

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bottles, labeled rye and Scotch, respectively. Pickett had had enough! He leaped away from the table, upsetting his chair.

"This damned place is haunted!" he shouted at Joe, who observed him with no more interest than before. "I didn't order these things! You see them there? I never ordered them!"

"O. K., O. K.," said Joe. For the first time his voice held a shade of expression. It was soothing. "So you didn't order them. An' I know you didn't order them. An' it ain't marked on your check. So sit down and take it easy, bud."

"But where did they come from?"

"Don't ask me, bud. I guess you brought 'em with you. Or Baker left 'em here."

"Me!" began Pickett.

"Sit down, bud," advised Joe, who was serving the four newcomers, "and have a drink. You'll feel better."

Pickett looked at the two men and two women lined against the bar. One of the men grinned at him. He returned to his table, and without sitting down, and more in the way of experiment than anything else, poured a thimbleful of liquor out of the bottle marked Scotch. He drank it. Nothing happened. Pickett was rather surprised, for he had gathered that whiskey caused the drinker physical discomfort, that found its expression in facial distortions. He experienced nothing of the sort. This stuff had a pleasant, smoky taste, and seemed to vanish in his mouth, without ever passing down his throat.

He tried a larger dose, and stood, his attention focused on his interior. Abruptly, the series of events that followed the absorption of the Bacardi was repeated, but run together and intensified, like a motion picture reeled off at unnatural speed. The globe of heat, but larger and hotter, reappeared in his stomach; it expanded swiftly and burst, scattered. A large part of it lodged in his throat. His waitress came up with his check and a glass of water, and he seized the glass and emptied its contents on the fire that burned within.

The four drinkers at the bar were watching him now with marked interest, and Pickett, who had had quite enough of this place, paid his check and started for the door.

"Hey!" called Joe. "There's your two quarts—"

"I don't want them!" said Pickett, emphatically, and made a commanding gesture of dismissal in the direction of the bottles. They instantly vanished.

The waitress uttered a shriek and scurried away.

"You wasn't foolin' me," said Joe, comfortably. "I knew you was one of these stage magicians soon's you come in."

Pickett, his eyes rolling wildly, dashed out the door.

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BLUE DUSK filled the street, and the cool, tangy air of October drifted like a cleansing tide slowly eastward. Pickett drew in huge, grateful breaths of it, and a measure of his composure returned to him. He glanced up and down the street. Few people were about, and most of the buildings were dark and silent. Overhead, the sharp, autumn stars sparkled in a clear, dark-blue field of sky.

He was drunk, thought Pickett. That was the simple answer to the whole thing. He'd never been drunk before, and didn't know what to expect. And if this was what happened, he'd be damned sure he never got drunk again!.

The best place for him was home and in bed. He straightened his shoulders and started carefully down the street, watching his feet suspiciously. A fresh consideration presented itself. Would it be wise to go home, drunk, this early? Mrs. Henderson would still be up, and he had no wish to be informed on her opinions concerning carousal and wassail!

He halted indecisively.

Hell! He was out to celebrate; he had something worth celebrating. And probably getting drunk was like getting in a cold pool—the worst was now over, and the remainder might be pleasant. Certainly an enormous part of the population thought so!

But he had no money—nothing to celebrate with. He wished he had those two bottles back. It was very funny about those bottles! Very damn funny! What had become of them, anyway?

A glint of glass near the curb caught his eye, and Pickett glanced down to discover the two bottles, or their twins, sitting side by side on the curbing, like two street urchins.

He leaped like a guilty conscience. From the wall of a building he stared fearfully at the two innocent-looking quart bottles as though he expected them to charge upon him, or explode.

They did neither, but sat smugly side by side, shoulders touching. Only their long shadows, created by the street light on the opposite pavement, reached toward him.

Pickett looked up and down the street. It was deserted and very quiet. Cautiously, he approached the bottles and sat down on the curb beside them. Inebriation, he decided philosophically, unquestionably *had* something! He tentatively picked up one of the bottles. It was real and solid.

His mind was shrieking that these bottles, if they were the same, fractured all rules of logic. Pickett asked his mind to be still, and took a swallow of the substantial liquid the bottle held. His old friend, the globe of heat, returned, but only momentarily this time; it seemed to be quickly absorbed and distributed over his whole being.

There was a squashy sound on his other side, and Pickett turned to confront his earlier acquaintance, the fat man. He had joined Pickett and the bottles on the curbing.

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"Been lookin' f'r yu, bud," announced the fat man. "Wanted t' buy you—"

"Have another o' the same," invited Pickett, and offered him one of the bottles.

The fat man accepted it, looked at the label, and sniffed at the neck. Then he patted it affectionately.

"Drink up," suggested Pickett.

"What you got for a chaser?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"A chaser," repeated the fat man. "You know—water or somethin'."

"Oh." Pickett made it clear that he had no chaser.

"Well, come on. We'll go somewhere." The fat man hauled Pickett to his feet and started for the London Grill, at which Pickett set up such a fierce protest that the fat man was constrained to halt.

"O. K.," said Pickett's new friend. "If you don't like that place we'll go somewhere else. I don't like it much m'self. They steal yu' beer!"

THEY MADE OFF down the street, Pickett half willing, half reluctant to be led. This gentleman, partly sozzled though he might be, appeared to know his way around. And he had money, and he wanted to treat. Also, Pickett felt obligated to celebrate.

Having the leisure, and being for the moment undistracted by the rush of events, he studied his companion more closely than he had before.

His first impression had not been inaccurate. The man was undoubtedly fat; flesh, thick, pushing masses of it, encroached upon Pickett, and could be neither denied nor ignored. The man was also tall—several inches more than six feet—so that he did not look so much round and soft, as towering and ponderous. Like so many stout persons his features were insignificant; lost in the hills of his cheeks and chins. He wore a rakish gray Homburg, and the hair that appeared from beneath it was pale, fine, and thin.

"What's your name?" asked Pickett.

"Why, you know me!" chided his friend, in amiable reproach. "George B. Baker, 'lumimim . . . 'lumunin—you know, I sell paint! 'Limumin paint. Gemme to tell yu 'bout it sometimes! We han'le the besdamn stock o' lemon . . . lemonin— We han'le the damn besstock o' paint in the whole world, yessir!"

They rounded a sudden corner, Pickett swinging wide on the fat man's arm, like the end man in crack-the-whip. Each of them, in their unoccupied hands, held a corkless bottle, in which the liquor gurgled and chuckled, and from which it occasionally emerged. They left a trail of splashes behind them.

Up to this point the charm that now dwelt within Pickett's vitals had been more or less inactive. Never before, in all the long centuries since its creation, had it been completely uncontrolled, and left almost to its own devices! It was like a jungle animal, long captive, that paces back and forth

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past the door of its cage, accidentally left open, and does not realize that it may walk out.

True, when Pickett dismissed the bottles it had attended to that; and when he wished them back again it had performed that chore. These unintentional commands were obeyed solely because of the compulsion of long habit; Pickett, totally unaware of his new member, could never have controlled it had he known of its existence, for he lacked the necessary knowledge.

Now, however, as when that jungle animal extends a cautious muzzle through this unfamiliar opening, the charm essayed an experiment of its own, and Pickett uttered a sudden, startled squawk. With a jerk he disengaged himself from his huge convoy, and began a wild plucking at his coat.

George B. Baker, the aluminum paint salesman, watched interestedly as Pickett waltzed about him. He was even more interested to observe a large, gray-and-blue pigeon emerge, apparently, from the inside breast pocket of his friend's jacket. It clung to Pickett's chest a moment, beating its wings frantically, then flew off into the night.

Mr. Baker watched the direction it took. "Homin' pigeon, ain't it? You'n F. B. I. man, ain't yu? Yu know, I forgot all about that! Was just now tryin' to remember what your line was."

Pickett didn't answer. He stood gasping rapidly, and automatically running his hands over his person. His bottle, abandoned at the beginning of hostilities, lay in fragments on the paving. The pale liquor streamed down to the gutter, its fragrant bouquet eddying around them, borne on the erratic air.

"Sending in a report, huh?" suggested Baker, still staring after the vanished pigeon.

Pickett found a pigeon's egg in another pocket, and laid it carefully on the curb. "I'm going home," he stated, in a breathless voice.

"Sure! That's the spirit!" agreed Baker, heartily. "And this time we'll go to a good place!"

He linked arms with Pickett again, and that benumbed young man had neither the strength nor the breath to protest. So egocentrified was his attention, he was barely aware of the paint salesman, and followed docilely on the towline of the huge man's arm. They set an erratic course toward the more animated streets.

BACK at the London Grill, Forringwood complacently awaited the arrival of the contingent of imps under the leadership of Van der Wisken. But the manner of that arrival so shocked his urban sensibilities, so shattered his complacency, that complete collapse before the cyclonic Van der Wisken was inevitable.

The crowd at the bar was larger by this time, and every head swiveled round, and a number of drinks were overturned, when the street door burst open with a crash, slammed wildly back against the wall, and stood shudder-

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ing on its hinges. Even Joe, that monolithic man, was startled; but not sufficiently so as to cause him to drop the cocktail shaker.

"Wind's pickin' up," he told his customers, and came from behind the bar and closed the door. The crowd went back to its drinking.

Not Forringwood, however. He stared aghast at the five imps who were swiftly and thoroughly searching the place. A sixth, Van der Wisken himself, moved purposefully toward Forringwood.

The leader of the imps was a living little dynamo. He was round and solid, and the air around him crackled with electricity. Most of his person was concealed beneath an enormous, jet-black, bristling beard, each wiry hair of which gleamed like patent leather. This riot of hair foamed down over the hemisphere formed by his chest and stomach, and ended in a stiff, upward curl near the equator; it wrapped around the whole lower part of his fierce little face, and poured smaller side-cataracts out over his thick shoulders and down his

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broad back. It became one with the hair of his head. The high-crowned brown cap he wore rode unsteadily on this tide of hair, well above his round skull.

Out of the tangle, on either side, thrust his stubby, thick little arms; snapping black eyes, under ferocious black brows, stood above it. The visible skin of his face was brown and wrinkled and leathery as through long exposure to sun and wind.

Absurdly short, thick legs, that yet could—and did—twinkle like a rabbit's, supported this impressive mass.

He bounced across to Forringwood. "You!" he barked like a top sergeant. "You, t'ere! Vot's your name?"

Forringwood gaped at him.

"Now by Mab and by Atropos!" exclaimed Wisken, his face red with quick anger. "I teach you to anzer when I asg!" He pointed a stubby finger, and a crackle of thin blue lightning sprang to the nub of Forringwood's nose.

"Ow!" howled the city elf, clapping chubby hand over the injured member.

"You talkg now, eh?" Forringwood bobbed his head rapidly, his eyes watering. "Goot! I asg you again; vot's your name?"

"Forringwood!" squeaked that deflated egoist.

"Vorringwoot! Goot! Now, I asg you some quezjuns, und you speakg up qvick and true! I know iv you lie, Vorringwoot, und I'm telling you now you be zorry iv you do!"

"He ain't here, chief." A thin little imp halted beside Wisken, and saluted. The others stood in a group near the door. They were sampling one of Joe's bottles.

"No. Ogay. Tell t'boys wait by t'door. Now, Vorringwoot, vhere did dot convounded Rivgin go, eh?"

"Rivkin?" Forringwood made an herculean effort to pull himself together and appear surprised. It was a dismal failure, and, at the sight of Wisken's finger coming up again, he abandoned the attempt altogether. "Oh, Rivkin! Yes. He was here. He's gone."

Wisken's face began purpling again. "Ve know he's gone, zany! I asg you vhere did he go, und how long ako!"

"A half hour or so. I don't know where he went! How should I? He beat it out the front door!" said Forringwood sullenly.

"But you know something else, eh? Something about t' charm, not? Vell, qvick! Speakg up! Virst I tell you I am chief of bolice, mayor, und chairman of cidy council. Now, Vorringwoot, you talkg qvick!"

Forringwood did. While he massaged his reddened and stinging nose, he told in a few words of Rivkin's disposal of the charm. And Wisken sailed into a storm of temper that was almost too much to be contained by his chunky body. He stamped on the floor, spat a sulphurous, crackling clutch of Dutch oaths, and bounced three times around the room like a fireball, charring the floor in places, and smashing glasses and cracking bottles. A

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blue envelope of electricity sprang into visibility around him, and flashed and sparkled, and discharged hot and angry sparks.

The patrons of the bar made a concerted dash for exits; some toward the street, some toward the main part of the hotel.

Forringwood departed swiftly with the contingent that left by way of the street exit—this was no place for a pacifist! He was a very much chastened elf. In the future he would confine his drinking to his own quiet library; this outburst, he was sure, would draw half the mediums, extrasensory perceptionists, and psychical research enthusiasts in the country! The wee folk in this area would be having a tough time from now on. Damn that fat Wisken for a blundering, thick-headed Dutch menace!

But he needn't have worried. Joe wasn't worrying. He calmly waited, leaning on his bar. He saw the blue, electric glow that surrounded Wisken, and ascribed it and the disturbance it was causing to purely natural phenomena. A fireball, that's all it was. They usually came in and went out open doors or windows. And when this one, with a last, spitting crackle that sounded curiously like speech, darted out the door left open by the fugitives, Joe was confirmed in his belief. He closed the door, gathered up the broken glass, mopped up the spilled liquor, and draped himself over his bar to await the inevitable return of customers. Life holds few surprises for bartenders.

Pickett, meanwhile, had visited two more bars, and had been treated to "another o' the same" several times by his expert and expansive pilot. He was conscious now, as they moved along the crowded, brightly lit street, of a queer tingling around his lips, and of a lift of spirits such as his ordinarily dour nature rarely experienced.

Living and inanimate objects, however, continued making their appearance—suddenly and inexplicably—upon his person; his pockets were apparently inexhaustible cornucopias, seething with such objects.

In one bar, in reaching for his handkerchief, he had drawn forth instead a blue silk flag, at least a yard square. It fell open on the bar, and revealed the legend, stitched across it with crimson thread: Kentucky Legion—1906. Its borders were trimmed with crimson fringe.

The bartender had expressed a considered and judicial appreciation, and Baker had announced proudly that his friend was "an F. B. I. man," as though that explained the presence of the flag.

This discovery had disturbed Pickett less than the arrival of a rabbit which had taken place at their previous port-of-call. There, while the barman had watched bug-eyed, he had found in, and withdrawn from an ordinary whiskey glass, an adult white rabbit! His fellow drinkers had applauded vigorously, and demanded further demonstrations of his art. Instead, Pickett joined the rabbit in flight. Unlike the rabbit, he was overtaken by Baker.

In spite of the jovial humor that was engulfing Pickett almost against his will, the sudden advent of such strange and unexpected chattel troubled him;

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this was an attribute to indulgence in alcohol which he did not remember ever having heard described or discussed.

Further, he experienced sudden and irresistible compulsions to extend his hand out into the empty air; and when his hand almost involuntarily shot out, it invariably grasped an object, previously invisible, that hung in space before him. Several times it was lit cigarettes, which he philosophically smoked, or threw away. Once it was a bulbous meerschaum pipe. This he presented to Baker.

The last thing he had thus plucked out of the empty air was a teakwood wand or staff-of-office, intricately carven in a manner which Pickett thought he recognized as typical of the culture of Polynesia. This object, about three feet in length, he carried like a cane. It attracted no little attention, and some comment, but Pickett, concerned with his own bewildering problem, was not aware of it.

Gratified by its earlier successes, the charm, lodged deep within Pickett's chest cavity, was proceeding happily with its experiments. That these were of a singularly idiotic nature is, upon consideration, readily condoned. Although centuries old, the charm had had no opportunity to develop its own resources; it had of necessity been always and completely obedient to its masters. A consequent paucity of imagination, initiative, and inspiration is to be expected. The Polynesian staff represented, to date, its most original effort.

Freedom, however, is a heady wine, particularly for those by whom it has previously been untasted; and research burgeons under the strong light of liberty. Pickett's passing thoughts or wishes, when strong enough, were fitfully, erratically, and sometimes erroneously gratified; in the interims the charm devoted itself to further investigations of its own powers. It was, it felt, moving toward greater things.

AHEAD OF THEM a large blue-and-orange neon sign winked at Pickett and his companion. Blue letters burned the legend "Don't Fail to Visit the Monkey Bar at the Blakeley" against the night sky. Orange monkeys sped endlessly over a rectangular course around these words. It was toward this oasis that Baker was moving, full ahead, with Pickett bobbing like an unballasted skiff at his side.

As they crossed the lobby of the Blakeley, Pickett disconcerted the other occupants of the room by plucking a shiny top hat out of the air. Baker delightedly insisted that he wear it. In the elevator that took them to the roof a kangaroo rat achieved corporeality, and peeped inquiringly out of Pickett's pocket. The shriek of a lady passenger advised him of its arrival.

Their fellow passengers and the elevator operator were now regarding them with signal suspicion, and Pickett was glad to escape from the close confines of their conveyance to what he at first accepted as a long, shadowy jungle glade.

Closer inspection resolved it into a passageway cunningly contrived to

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give such an impression. Trunks of huge trees partially emerged from the painted walls, their thick roots sinking into the floor; creepers and vines tangled overhead, and hung down with the bearded moss; and here and there a palm leaned over the narrow aisle, its fronds rocking in an artificial breeze. In the distance, girls in grass skirts and little else, moved gracefully about carrying trays.

Boles and branches of trees and the looping tentacles of vine and creeper, were ornamented with a motley host of stuffed monkeys and colorful birds; and in camouflaged wire cages built into the walls, living monkeys squeaked and chattered, parrots yelled and squawked, brilliant-hued tropical birds whistled, belled and called. Living air plants nodded on swaying branches.

Concealed lighting gave a greenish, twilight illumination, and somewhere farther along, saxophones moaned to the rustling mutter of dancing feet.

The hat-check girl relieved Pickett of his top hat and unusual walking stick, and he and Baker entered the main room. It was a larger, more splendid, and more complex iteration of the corridor leading to it, and was partly roofless—the larger, outer area, opposite the entrance, being open to the sky. Tree trunks, supporting the edge of the roof, concealed sliding glass panels which, when drawn out, separated the two sections of the room, closing off the inner and roofed compartment during inclement weather.

It was open now, and beyond the line of tree trunks a close-packed, colorful mass of dancers eddied and swung, and drifted in slow currents. Seen through the intervening tree trunks, and the leaning boles of palms, and in the soft, sourceless light, the scene was glamorously unreal-looking.

In the inner section, where Pickett and his friend stood, were groves of palms, and sprays and fountains of vivid, tropical flowers. In the carefully careless glades formed among this flora small tables were scattered thickly. All of those within their view were occupied by a scintillating company, which, to Pickett's artless gaze, was almost Elysian in its brilliance. Most of the men were attired in dark and spotless evening clothes; a few wore ordinary business suits.

But the women, in evening gowns of all colors—ice-blue, lilac, silver, screaming red—really startled the eye. Pickett's head jerked back as his eyes were assaulted by some fresh and shrieking color or combination of colors.

It was something entirely new to Pickett, and it suggested to him only one thing—a scene from some technicolor musical comedy, done with all of Hollywood's flamboyant license. The women, too, were impossibly perfect, like movie stars, or the incredible girls seen in advertisements, and on magazine covers.

"C'me on!" boomed Baker, pulling at him. "The bar's over here." Baker was a man of single purpose.

Pickett turned and observed the bar, a great hemisphere springing out from the rear wall. It, too, was embowered in imitation tropical vegetation. Plush monkeys, nightmarishly colored, dangled on elastic cords. Mirrors set

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in the rear wall duplicated and reduplicated endlessly the fantastic scene. Upon the other walls were painted apes—weird, elongated, modernistic beasts—that leered and grimaced at the daunted spectator.

There was, they discovered, only one place vacant at the bar. Pickett observed without surprise that the stools were made in the shape of giant toadstools.

He found himself drawn away by Baker, who was following one of the grass-skirted attendants of this menagerie. She led them by winding paths and through shadowy glades — occupied by diners and drinkers to whom they were, apparently, invisible— to a tiny table set against a wall.

They seated themselves and Baker gave the girl an order. A monstrous orang-utan, painted on the wall, made a third at their table. He leaned forward out of a riot of painted leaves and looked, thought Pickett, like Silenus.

A CHIPMUNK leaped from Pickett's sleeve, and dashed away across the floor, darting in and out among the flowers, palms and tables. In the shadows of the floor only its heavy stripes were visible. Few noticed it, and those that did only heard the faint, rapid scuttering of its little feet on the polished floor, or caught a flicker of black that was gone when they looked. It was silhouetted for an instant on the leaning bole of a palm, then vanished in the nest of fronds.

"Wha' wuz that!" exclaimed Baker.

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"A chipmunk," replied Pickett, examining the sleeve from which it had emerged. Now that he was seated, he determined to explore this mystery further. Whatever was wrong was with himself, he decided, because observation assured him that other revelers were not afflicted with such strange visitors as he. It wasn't the liquor that produced these disturbing manifestations—it must be his clothes. But this conclusion only baffled him further. His suit was fresh from the cleaner's, and he was convinced that that sober and businesslike establishment kept no menagerie of small fauna on the premises. At least, he had never encountered so much as a single pigeon there.

"Y' don' know what they gonna think of nex'," observed Baker, admiringly.

The sleeve, Pickett found, was now empty. But an inventory of his pockets brought to light several items which he was certain did not belong to him, and which had no business on his person. There was a mechanical yellow bird, that sang when wound up. It had a shrill and carrying carol, very pleasing to Baker, who immediately adopted it. Then there was an immensely long cigarette holder, two live green frogs, which Pickett released, and a long and varied series of tiny monkeys, some of plush, and similar, except in size, to those hanging about the room; others of a variety of substances, from wood to transparent matter that might have been glass. This interesting collection he spread out upon the table.

At this point the hula girl who attended them returned, bearing what Pickett at first believed to be two truncated cocoanuts. These were discovered to be in fact the drinking mugs of the place. They were mounted on short stalks with wide bases, like brandy glasses. Except for these supports, the two containers appeared to be actual, tooled cocoanut shells. Inside, and far down inside, a pale liquor washed, and exploded a potent bouquet in Pickett's face when he peered in.

The hula girl's dark eyes went wide as she took in the window display Pickett had arranged on the table. They went wider, and her jaw dropped, when Pickett's arm shot out stiffly, and—with a soft pop! and a pale flash—exhibited on its wrist a living, perfect, but unnaturally tiny marmoset.

She squealed, and the little creature, no more than three or four inches long, leaped from its perch and was absorbed by the environment.

"M' friend's an F. B. I. man," explained Baker, and gallantly offered their servitor the mechanical warbler. She took it unconsciously, and retreated backward, as though from the presence of royalty. The toy bird burst into its song as she went.

The two friends drank. And drank again. Time ceased to exist, and Pickett's usually tightened nerves relaxed; his spirit moved in ethereal realms, borne on the music, the bright colors, and on a sense of ease and competence that he had never known before.

He found himself laughing with pure joy of living, and at the strange spinning and swooping sensations that made a playground of his interior.

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No longer was he perturbed by the unpredictable and incredibly sudden objects that appeared upon his person; he found, instead, an abstract interest in them, and gave a surprised but courteous attention to their genesis and dispersal.

This was a delightful, if unbelievable, world into which his dear old friend, Mr. Baker, had guided him! Salesmen, thought Pickett, must lead pleasant and interesting lives.

TWICE, since they had arrived at the Monkey Bar, Baker had produced the crumpled, sweated money that seemed a species restricted entirely to himself, and paid their bills. This, Pickett now felt, was not fair. What was the matter with him! He'd just gotten a check, hadn't he? Or had he? He fumbled vaguely in a pants pocket, and his hand encountered something. He drew it out and stared at it doltishly, as well he might. The thing looked like an apprentice leather worker's attempt to contrive a cross between an ordinary flat wallet and a baggy, leathern pouch. On one side it bulged out loosely; on the other it was more or less flat. Pickett's name was embossed on the flat side. An added cause for surprise on Pickett's part was the fact that he never carried a wallet. However, it had his name on it so it must be his.

He slid open a zipper arrangement along one edge, and up-dumped its contents on the table.

There was a clink and rattle of metal, and a flood of coins poured out. Baker and Pickett scrabbled wildly to catch them as they rolled and wheeled over the table top. When they had them all flat and motionless before them, they found themselves regarding as weird a conglomeration of coinage as either had ever beheld.

There were English pence and halfpence, crowns and half crowns, guineas, groats, and florins; there were Dutch gulden and doits; Russian kopecks and rubles; Spanish doubloons; Portuguese dobras and johannes; there were kreutzers and krones and Chinese cash; old Scotch bawbees and bodles; yen and ducats and thalers; and even a few ancient pieces of eight.

Pickett and Baker, in their present condition, accepted them simply as coins; and coins were money, whether odd-looking or not. They collected them solemnly, and made little piles of them, according to the diameters of the coins. Then Pickett dug into his queer wallet, and fished out a mass of Confederate paper money, in which a few modern United States bills were intermingled. He sorted them out on the table, and, when the hula girl returned, ordered three more drinks, "one for Silenus."

"And if he don't drink it we will, won't we?" he asked Baker.

His friend agreed heartily, and under the impression that Pickett had expressed a desire to be informed on the paint business, launched upon a long and involved exposition, which neither understood, but which was exquisitely amusing and entertaining to both.

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The hula girl, with a resigned sigh, scratched among the litter on the table until she located a negotiable bill; this she took and departed.

Drinks went down. Pickett caught a phrase that sounded like "best lemon paint," and to be in the spirit of the thing, produced from a pocket a small glass jar full of a bright lemon-colored paint, which, when opened, gave off a distinct lemon odor.

This exhibit had an electric effect upon Baker. It very nearly sobered him. He took the jar from Pickett, smelled it, dipped a finger into its contents, streaked it across a small board he drew from a pocket, and even went so far as to taste it cautiously. This stuff was, he knew, something entirely new to the trade; its base he could not recognize at all!

"Why, thass . . . thass impossible!" he exclaimed, at length. "Where 'djoo geddid—I mean, get it? Where did you get that? Who makes it?"

Pickett was unable to help him here. He waved it airily away, and ordered "another o' the same for m' frien', Mr. Baker!"

"And bring me a menu," he told the girl. "I'm shelebrating, I am; and I'm going to try all the thingsh I never had before! All of 'em!"

"Hey! You wait here! I'll be back!" Baker towered out of his chair, and, tucking the jar into a voluminous pocket, moved away. "You stay here! Don' go 'way!" He strode off into the jungle.

"You watch out f'r the natives," warned Pickett darkly, waving good-by to his broad, retreating back. "Y' c'n hear'm out there—drums out in the hills! One of their sherry . . . cerrymonies, I s'pose. You watch out f'r'm! An', Baker!" he yelled as his friend sought a way through the glades, "be sure an' bring back a full supply o' quinine! I c'n feel touch of malaria righ' now! Don'chu forget!"

Baker waved to him and was engulfed by the jungle, and at that moment the hula girl brought two menus—one a liquor list; the other a supper menu.

IT HAD BEEN the liquor list Pickett wanted, but the suggestion of supper was attractive. He began a careful and somewhat arduous examination of the courses offered; his eyes, for some reason, refused to focus on the menu for more than a few moments at a time. The words would be clear before him; then his eyes would shift focus to a point some distance behind the menu, and the print would all run together. Glasses need changing, thought Pickett, after polishing them without effect. That was the trouble with writing—strain on the eyes.

He finally left it up to the girl, after making her clearly understand that he'd have no fish, and devoured hungrily the light supper she brought. Objects about him settled down after he'd eaten, but he felt an overpowering reluctance to leave his chair. The floor, he somehow knew, would begin rocking if he did.

He now began an avid study of the second menu. There were intriguing and glamorous names there, names redolent of the romantic tropics, of far and adventurous places. Pickett went down the list, checking with a

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pencil those he found most appealing: Daiquiri, El Presidente, Planter's Punch, Dubonnet, Jack Rose, Sazarac, Barbary Coast, Side Car, Pine Valley, Singapore Gin Sling, New Orleans Fizz, Ward 8, French "75."

While he was thus engaged, a young woman wandered into his little glade and stood observing him. She was tall, and smoothly made. Magnificent shoulders, incased in an immaculate, golden-brown skin, emerged from an off-the-shoulders evening gown of some flowing, diaphanous, white material. She radiated that dynamic and intense aura of vitality and strength that some feminine athletes possess. A mane of honey-colored hair, more brown than golden, and cut in a shoulder-length bob, swayed about the strong shaft of her neck, and half-concealed the long smooth muscles that made one flowing line of neck, shoulders and arms.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked Pickett, in a clear voice whose tone somehow matched her skin and hair.

He was too deeply immersed in his list and its surprising names to be aware of her. She studied him a few moments, her gray eyes calm under level brows, then repeated her question. When Pickett still remained oblivious, she shrugged her shoulders lightly and took the seat vacated by Baker.

"I've found a seat," she called to one of the hula girls who went by with a tray. "You can bring my drink over here."

Pickett became conscious of the presence of someone else at his table. "Don't think I need the quinine, after all, George," he announced without looking up. "You shouldn't have gone away, either. They brought sandwiches. But I'll tell the girl to bring some more when she comes back."

His companion glanced at him but made no comment, and Pickett, still busy with the list, took up the discussion of paint at the point at which it had been interrupted by Baker's hasty departure. To this the young lady

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listened for a time in silence, but at last broke in to advise Pickett of the substitution that had been made.

"Listen, my friend," she enunciated in a voice several tones louder than that she had previously used, "my name is not George Baker. And I don't sell paint—I wear it!"

Startled, Pickett snapped up his head, to stare with a frightened disbelief at the young woman. Had the strange events of which he seemed a focus done this to the fat man?

"You're not m' friend, Mr. Baker?"

"No," said the girl positively, swaying head and hair. "I am not Mr. Baker. My name is Dorothy Guilford. I'm female."

Pickett examined the well-shaped head, the clear features. She had a high straight brow, from which the long brown hair flowed back in deep and graceful waves, catching highlight and shadow. Her eyes were deep-set and serious, flanked by high, cleanly modeled cheekbones. The nose that stood between them had been drawn with care. It was narrow, not too long, and almost straight, being tilted up only a trifle near its tip. The wings of the nostrils were delicately flared. Her mouth was wide and full, and the long firm lines of her jaw done with the fine, sheer simplicity of a master sculptor.

And she had that peculiarly feminine quality of face which gives the beholder the impression that its possessor is extravagantly alive—a sort of supercharge of life, that, not to be contained within the body, is radiated through the skin. It struck Pickett dumb.

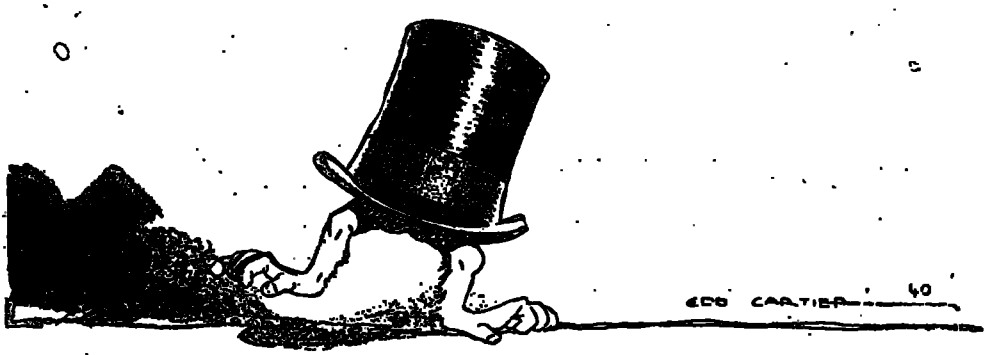
He went soberly back to his list. Anyway, if he *was* responsible for such a change in Baker—if this was his friend, altered beyond all recognition—the alteration was an incomparable improvement, and there was need of no excitement or regret.

The hula girl returned with Dorothy's drink, and Pickett, when she turned to him, handed her the menu.

"Bring me those," he told her.

"What's your order, please?"

"I want those, there," persisted Pickett. "The ones I marked."



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The girl looked at the menu, and her head bobbed back. "You want all these?" she asked, her eyes wide. "Who for?"

"For me and Silenus. And Mr. Baker, if he comes back," added Pickett, looking dubiously at Dorothy.

"You want 'em all at onct?"

Pickett considered. "I don't know. No. Bring three or four at a time. Maybe I'll like one so much I'll want to try it again."

The hula girl went away and left them, with an expression on her face that suggested she had been sandbagged. While awaiting his order Pickett began another inventory of his clothing, to see if any further animal life, or *objet d'art* had made their arrival. They had.

THE ENVIRONMENT had an apparently strong effect upon the charm; or it was peculiarly captivated by the simian anatomy. For again Pickett assembled on the table before him an extensive collection of inanimate monkeys. They were larger this time, and more closely resembled those hanging about nearby. He and his companion studied them with a common, serious interest.

Next, he discovered, nesting in an inside pocket, a tiny living parrakeet, and was sharply nipped by it before it flew off in chattering indignation. This altercation brought Dorothy out of her chair. She stood off a few feet while a number of mice, shrews, and squirrels made their appearance and took themselves elsewhere, either in silence or jabbering angrily.

Their table was surrounded, at a distance of a few feet, by banks of flowers and clusters of palms, and was partially or wholly hidden from most of the nearby diners; and, as most of the dispossessed fauna found new places of concealment in the shrubbery, few beyond Dorothy and Pickett were aware of them. Those that did catch glimpses of them, had glimpses only, and supposed they had seen bits of paper or other debris.

All these animals were naturally small; but, at the close of his impromptu exhibition of legerdemain, Pickett's arm went out in the now familiar gesture and an adult and full-sized lemur sprang into visibility, with the accompanying *pop!* and quick, pale-blue flash. It leaped for the security of the vines, and vanished. Pickett relaxed in his chair with a relieved breath.

For some moments Dorothy stood watching him. Then she peered under the table and behind his chair. At last, tentatively, she came back and sat down, but her alert gaze remained fixed upon her unusual table mate.

Pickett gave her no attention. After satisfying himself that he was once again in sole possession of his apparel, he looked hopefully about for the hula girl. She arrived with a tray crowded with an assortment of containers. Several of the large cocoanut shells dominated the gathering. Around them were huddled shallow cocktail glasses, tall thin glasses, round-bellied, short-stemmed glasses, and glasses that looked like ordinary water tumblers. She set the tray down with a clink of ice, and a jovial nodding of colored liquids from within the glass containers.

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This gathering of beverages was arranged in a semicircle before Pickett. The hula girl stood back and waited, with a sort of expectant apprehension. Dorothy, her own drink forgotten, stared unwinkingly.

And Pickett drank the contents of five of the containers in succession, slowly, and with evident enjoyment. It took some time, and the waitress was needed in other parts of the room. Duty carried her a few steps away, but there she stuck. Her will was insufficient to permit her to forego this spectacle.

Watching, Dorothy's head spun in sympathy. She shook herself and blinked, and she and the waitress exchanged glances.

"You can bring some more now," Pickett told the waitress, and she went dazedly away. He began on those that were left.

"Good heavens!" said Dorothy, finding her voice. "What are you doing —running an alcoholic blitzkrieg on yourself?"

"I bick . . . beg your pardon?"

"Skip it. But do you mind if I stay and watch? At a safe distance, of course."

Pickett didn't understand her, but he felt a warm affection for all of humanity, and would deny it nothing. His new-found friend—or was it Mr. Baker, in another incarnation?—he particularly liked. He nodded assent to whatever favor she desired of him. And then he slowly emptied the remaining glasses.

A warm invisible tide was flowing in the room. It rose up around Pickett, laving him deliciously. It was confiding, soothing, like the gentle, soporific touch of some tropic sea. Over its slowly heaving surges pulsed the languorous music of the distant orchestra. Pickett wanted to sink into it, and drift away.

But at his chest, the slow tide stuck, and rose no higher.

Pickett, in fact, was ready to pass out. But the charm would not have it so. It could not disperse the dizzying fumes that rose from his potations; it could not preserve him—or itself, to some extent—from drunkenness. But it could, and most emphatically did, stop him from falling into insensibility, and carrying it along with him! Surrender this sudden, splendid liberty, after so many weary years of slavery! It was unthinkable! And besides, the charm was about to launch the most ambitious experiment it had yet attempted. And for these reasons it preserved Pickett alike from the illness and insensibility he was striving so hard to merit.

So, irrevocably awake, he savored the heady and delicious perfumes of flowers that streamed in fine threads of scented air through their narrow glade, and peered hopefully along the jungle aisles in search of their hula girl, and her interesting goblets. She was, at that very moment, wending her way through the shadowy aisles and pleasant glades that intervened between the bar and Pickett's table. But she was destined never to arrive; at least, during that evening.

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THERE WAS a sudden, shuddering lurch deep within Pickett's vitals. He gave it no more than passing attention, lost as it was among an heterogeneous congress of such strange, internal sensations.

At the same time, a sharp, bluish flash flared through the entire room, accompanied by a loud, penetrating *crack!* Few of the diners and drinkers gave it any attention. Those that did thought that some celebrity in another part of the room was being photographed.

Actually, the charm was responsible for both of these manifestations. It relaxed inside Pickett, and waited, having accomplished its greatest achievement to date. All the plush and leather and sawdust monkeys, all the stuffed monkeys, apes, and birds that perched on tree limb or clung to vine were now alive!

The charm had not long to await the results of its efforts. There was a moment, had anyone been aware of it, of hushed and breathless immobility. Then—as Joe, the bartender, would have put it, had he been privileged to have been a witness—"all hell broke loose in a hen house!"

With almost one accord, the apes and monkeys descended upon the tables, shrieking, snatching, chattering, leaping and bouncing; the parrots, parrakeets, cockatoos set up a riotous, nerve-shredding and continuous yell, and flung their bright bodies meteorlike through the shocked and shaking air. Other tropical birds joined them, whirling in many-colored clouds through the swaying vegetation. The rush of wing beats was like the sound of a waterfall.

Monkeys, seemingly as winged as the birds, shot from branch to table, from table to vine; swung wildly on creeper and hanging moss; made landings with irreverent indifference on floor, table, or sacrosanct head; and, once landed on these superior skulls, in a second tore down the expensive coiffures, ripped off the jewels and ribbons—and sometimes rats—and flung on in wild career to further conquests.

Women screamed, and some fainted. Men cursed. Pickett dazedly observed his peaceful little glade invaded by a maniac horde of apes and monkeys—screaming, hooting, cursing in a dozen simian dialects.

They shot past, swerving so that their path took them across the table top, and left ruin in their wake.

A huge baboon—an adult male, old in years, but still youthful in spirit—halted long enough to collect the water carafe and the tablecloth. He departed with the cloth over his back, and wielding the heavy glass bottle like a club. With this weapon the animal cleared a space about him in the roaring torrent of his fellows, and then beat upon the floor with it, at the finish of each leap. He vanished, and the heavy drumming was lost in the universal din.

Pickett took refuge in a narrow space between the wall and the thick trunk of the palm behind his chair, and from this vantage looked about for his companion. She had armed herself, he discovered, with her chair, and greeted each fresh spate of birds or monkeys like an animal trainer. Her back protected by the wall, she thrust the chair legs at them, and, although

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they called down imprecations on her head, most of them maintained a respectful distance. Those that didn't were thumped smartly, or prodded with a chair leg, until they learned wisdom.

The bass drum was booming frantically in the distance. Pickett wondered whether it was being attacked by monkeys, or if the drummer was sending out a distress signal. Monkeys, probably, he decided, as a small capuchin backed into their clearing, dragging a clarinet.

Two spider monkeys and a gibbon followed him, wrestling over a violin. Strings twanged insanely, and snapped one after another, but the case of the violin continued booming hollowly to the beat of tiny hands. The gibbon finally obtained possession of the remains of the instrument, and wielded it like a two-handed ax, driving his rivals in panic before him.

THE CRASH of tables going over was a steady booming undertone to the thousand and one screams, cries, yelps, curses and unidentifiable sounds beating at the roof and walls. Added to it was the panicky slap and patter of running feet; of many feet beating frantically on the slick floor. And somewhere up near the ceiling a South American howling monkey was throwing its tremendous, lionlike roar out over the room—a sound so powerful that it must be heard to be believed!

An uninterrupted stream of beings, divided almost equally between the human and the simian, tore through their clearing. Pickett stared in dazzled amaze; he had not believed there could be so many differing kinds of monkeys! He saw little monkeys and big monkeys; short-haired and long-haired monkeys; monkeys with naked black faces; others with bushy white beards. There were red monkeys and black monkeys; green, tan, olive and gray monkeys; monkeys with tails twice the length of their bodies, and monkeys with no tails at all.

A giant mandrill, with a particolored face like a surrealist's painting, charged by with a flash of terrible, lionlike fangs. He was followed by a parliament of smaller beasts; squirrel monkeys, with white, clownlike faces and black scalps; spider monkeys, all legs, arms and tail; little guenons with big eyes, bright-yellow sideburns, and white mustaches.

Intermingled with this dumfounding pithecoid riot were human beings—wild-eyed, cursing men; women just as wild-eyed and frequently more profane. They fought the little beasts—plucked monkeys from their hair, their shoulders, from their skirts and jackets—and in return were bitten and shrieked at, and had their clothing ripped and torn.

One young woman passed, her skirt gone, slippers gone, and with a banner of black hair streaming behind her. She was running with a grim seriousness of a contending sprinter in a championship match, and traveling so fast that she was overtaking and passing the main stream of her competitors. Unable to check her speed she plunged into a tangle of flowers and vine and went down. The squadron of gibbons immediately behind her went over her in long leaps; and her words, as she extricated herself, were so

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sulphurous that the hurrying current, both pithecoid and human, gave her a wide berth.

A reedy little man, badly out of wind, and minus most of his outer clothing, tottered by, squeaking in a fainting voice: "My lawyer! I'll have my lawyer—"

One of the cocoanut-drinking mugs whizzed out of the middle distance and crashed against the wall close to Pickett's head. He ducked back, and then cautiously peered out. A Barbary ape, high in the foliage, had an armload of the mugs, and was hurling them, with remarkable accuracy, at whatever took his fancy. Pickett saw him bean a large and ferocious mandrill, and lay him out flat. These mugs made admirable missiles, and a dozen other simian sharpshooters were quickly enlisted. The cocoanut shells began flying about like antique cannon balls.

The potted plants, shorn of their disguises, were toppling now; the big ones coming down with a hissing rush and a heavy jar, and sending fresh battalions of birds and monkeys, that had been concealed in their leafy crowns, into the fray.

A contingent of little apes that apparently had started from the cloakroom made their appearance, bearing walking sticks, top hats, silk cloaks, furs, and even umbrellas. One very tiny animal, visible only as a pair of dark splay feet, moved sedately under a large opera hat until a bigger ape landed directly on top of it, and closed it on him!

PICKETT WAS AWARE of someone plucking at him. He reluctantly withdrew his fascinated gaze to discover that Dorothy had joined him on his side of their table. She was still armed with her chair. He withdrew farther into his niche, and she crowded in with him.

"If it were early summer," she shouted in his ear, "I'd say this was one of the political conventions! Looks like they're parading for their candidate!"

Two of the hula girls went past, harried by a swarm of small brown monkeys that had already torn most of the grass skirts away.

"Don't you think we ought to get out of here?" yelled Dorothy.

Pickett stared in awe at the scene of battle. "Go through that!" he shouted in return. "Do you mean go through all that out there?"

A red, green and yellow parrot rolled into view, at death grips with a brown macaque. It was making such a perfectly fiendish uproar that they had to wait until the battle lurched away to speak again.

"We gotta go sometime," argued Dorothy, "or they'll come for us!"

Pickett defensively tried to squeeze himself farther into the narrow space, but Dorothy dragged him forth. Once away from the support of the wall and the palm trunk, Pickett found with surprise that his brain and his legs had gotten disconnected! They were still there, his legs were, but they moved of themselves, ignoring his efforts to direct them. Each leg occasionally started off on a course of its own, independently of the other.

He was compelled to cling to Dorothy to remain upright at all. She held

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him with her left arm, defending them both with the light chair gripped in her right hand.

Pickett, reeling before the concerted attack of shattering sound, amazing spectacle, and the increasingly effective fumes of alcohol, could do no more than hold to Dorothy and stare. That competent young woman, once they had plunged into the full fury of battle, required both her hands for defense, and Pickett was left to hang on as best he could. Once he was forced to release the grip of one hand to beat off the flanking attack of a squad of gray langurs. In the action, the grip of his other hand was torn loose, and he was almost engulfed in the whirling melee before Dorothy could reach him.

Familiar with the plan of the room, Dorothy wasted no time in an attempt at a circling movement along the walls, to avoid combat. She began and fought her way directly across the floor toward the exit.

THE RUIN was marvelous. Away from the walls, the floor was one hurrah's nest of overturned chairs and tables; of napery, china, silver, food and drink; of lianas—torn down from above and now inextricably tangled with all the rest—leveled palms, broken palms, palm fronds, and a prismatic and ubiquitous mass of flowers, in sprays or singly, whole or in fragments.

Over and around this unsteady mixture whirled the kaleidoscopic rout of humans, birds, and monkeys—fighting, screaming, wrestling; slipping and falling; bounding up; flying and jumping; and scrambling up the thick boles of the artificial trees which alone remained upright of the real and simulated vegetation of the place.

Pickett saw men and women, whom he would have said would have had difficulty climbing a very steep flight of stairs, perched high in these trees, and staring down through the heat and the dust of battle. In their posture and expression, he noted with alcoholic interest, they curiously resembled the simian foe.

Carried away by the excitement and contagion of combat, some human individuals—possibly approaching more closely the simian in their mental make-up—attacked all living things within their reach. One such person, a young and flamingly red-headed woman, incongruously clad in lace panties and a torn Tuxedo jacket, launched a howling attack upon Pickett, her red claws reaching for his face.

Dorothy swiftly and scientifically gave her one in the solar plexus with a leg of the chair, and the fire-colored Amazon disappeared from Pickett's horrified sight.

At times they went under, and Pickett was trampled and bitten, was rolled over living bodies that heaved and cursed beneath him; was thumped, and smeared with the muck of the floor, and was finally and inevitably hauled to his feet by the unconquerable Dorothy. His jacket was ripped completely in half up the back, and Dorothy's originally trailing gown was now an apron.

In a clearing barricaded by overturned tables and chairs, she halted their advance to map out future action and to regain breath and energy. A little

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capuchin, perched in the wreckage, was calmly consuming a handful of mints, utterly undisturbed by all the hubbub and confusion around him. He watched them, his eyes rolling up solemnly as his small muzzle returned again to his cupped hands. A black-and-yellow bird, about the size of a robin, walked chickenlike through the rubble of the floor, alternately picking up mints and uttering a shrill, prolonged whistle on a single note. It gave them way, walking carefully around them; but other than that was as unperturbed as its simian companion.

"Thank Heaven," said Dorothy, as they went over the top, "I've had plenty of training in bargain basements!"

Pickett's original paralyzing amazement was disappearing now, its place being taken by a sort of alcoholic *esprit de corps*. He struck out vigorously and inaccurately, and if his assistance was largely ineffectual, it was at least whole-hearted.

The capuchin watched them go, and shook his head in wonder that any creature was so foolish as to desert this pleasant, mint-littered sanctuary for the hazards beyond.

DOROTHY'S five-foot-eleven inches of height, and her one hundred and fifty pounds of weight, now proved themselves. With the shattered fragments of the chair held before her like a shield, she crouched and charged. She had fixed up a mountain-climber's rope out of a bit of liana found in the clearing, tying Pickett to her, with a three or four-foot length between them. At the end of this towline he pendulummed wildly, throwing enthusiastic haymakers to left and right.

Dorothy broke off another leg of the chair over the thick skull of a baboon that leaped at them. The baboon was attacked in turn by three other apes, before it could renew its assault, and Dorothy swung up the chair seat in time to intercept a flung cocoanut shell. It burst into fragments on the chair seat.

A plate skimmed over the heads of the throng, whirling viciously. It just missed Pickett and a stout and dignified-appearing gentleman who trotted along behind him, and for whom they were acting as interference. He was armed with a table leg, and gave Pickett considerable assistance in beating off flanking attacks until he was brought down by two grim ladies very much in need of his coat.

Then they hit the close-packed ranks of the main mass of the contenders. It broke, reeling before the fury of Dorothy's charge, and they plunged in, and were engulfed as it closed its ranks behind them.

They fought their way on, stubbornly, Dorothy breaking a path before them with the jagged fragments of the chair, Pickett contributing little more than an exultant, Indianlike howling and a great good will.

"Pickett's m' name, and I'm a Rebel!" he bawled. "And I can give the Rebel yell!"

He attracted the attention of a monkey marksman in one of the trees, and

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got a woman's slipper in the back of his neck. Furiously, he swung on an innocent bellboy struggling forward at his side, and saw him fall backward and vanish with a very un-Pickett-like pleasure.

Pickett's battle lust was considerably cooled by a sight of the exit to the corridor that led to the elevators. Had he been free, he would have turned back when they reached it. It was a scene worthy of Doré. Blue-clad hotel attendants were here mingled with the other humans, but they were far from allied in purpose. The erstwhile patrons of the Monkey Bar knew but one single desire—to get out! The attendants, on the other hand, were making a hopeless attempt at a sifting operation, permitting the passage to freedom of the human element, and the rebuff or capture of all other fauna.

This operation was signally unsuccessful, as far more of the apes, traveling over the roadway of human heads, and birds going by wing, were passing down the corridor than anything else.

When Dorothy and Pickett made their appearance at this gateway of escape, the action had become with simple sincerity a riot. Bells and whistles added to the din, and a nerve-shattering fire siren periodically blasted all other sounds out of existence.

Dorothy couched her ruined chair frame before her, squared her strong shoulders, got her head well down, tugged at the liana to be sure Pickett was still there, and went in. Pickett, with a final fervent and commendable swing at the vengeful bellboy, who was trying to seize him, vanished in the ruck after her. He gave a last, exultant whoop, and then his voice, too, was lost.

THEY PASSED DOWN that corridor, and came out at the other end, and about all that was left to them of clothing or possessions was the rope that bound them together, and a splintery, spiky shield of wood that had been the seat of the chair. Tatters of Dorothy's vanished gown hung in ribbons from the length of liana bound around her waist, and Pickett was similarly adorned with the relics of his trousers. Physically, by a combination of good luck and Dorothy's management, they had escaped more or less uninjured.

Dorothy had a fair-sized lump on her forehead, and Pickett had been bitten on the shoulder by a small monkey. His glasses, however, had miraculously escaped unbroken. Minor scratches and bruises were scattered all over each of them, and they were alike smeared and daubed with dust and dirt, and with a conglomerate mixture of food and drink. An Amerindian, painted and ready for the war trail, would not have felt ill-at-ease in their company.

They were not out of the front lines yet. The elevator lobby was a scene of carnage almost equal to that of the corridor. Refugees were fighting to get into elevators, and hotel attendants were fighting to get out. Casualties and noncombatants milled on the side lines, shrieking advice or invective. Monkeys cheered and screeched.

Dorothy took one look, then made for the stairs, located in a concealed alcove down a short passage. The human ingredient of the throng lessened

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in this narrow hall, for it was an exit unknown to most. Monkeys remained just as dense, for to the simian mind, all ways were one.

Her first glance down the stairwell filled Dorothy with despair. The police were coming up, in numbers, and with whistles shrilling! Such of the human refugees as they encountered were being instantly taken in custody, and either brought back, or passed down to other officers below. A running skirmish between police and monkeys was also in progress, the police swinging their sticks, the monkeys bombarding them in return with cocoanut shells, glasses, chinaware, shoes, and a hodgepodge of other debris. Other, more daring or more frightened simians were dashing heedlessly down the stairs, leaping from policeman to policeman, like so many Elizas springing from floe to floe. Many were not too frightened to snatch a policeman's helmet as they went.

Pickett, too, saw the police, and the battle fury left him completely. He wished earnestly that they were invisible. And instantly they were invisible, to all except each other!

The charm, shocked and subdued by the results of its last experiment, was confining itself for the moment to obedience to the wishes of its host.

Dorothy and Pickett were, of course, unaware of their changed status. But retreat was useless, so they flattened themselves against the wall and awaited capture.

To their surprise the police brushed by them without a glance, hustling bellicose warriors ahead of them, passing women and the aged down the stairs, and swatting wickedly at the hurtling, yelling monkeys.

The stairs cleared of unattached humans, as the officers formed a cordon at the top. Dorothy whistled in astonishment, and a very stout woman, liberally painted with cosmetics, condiments, and dirt, stared wildly about her at the empty air, and relaxed into a fresh fit of hysterics in the arms of the hapless policeman who convoyed her.

"Lesh get outa here!" said Pickett, taking the initiative.

They hurried down the stairs, Dorothy noting with uneasy surprise that even the monkeys ignored them.

"I wish I had some closhes," muttered Pickett, becoming for the first time drunkenly aware of his near-nudity.

Over his arm, instantly, hung a neatly pressed gray suit. As one, Pickett and Dorothy recoiled from it. It was she who, after staring a moment in disbelief, picked it up from the steps where it had fallen. She felt it, shook it, ran her hand over the material. It was real enough. She gave Pickett the pants, and took the coat for herself. With feminine pragmatism, she first put on the coat, and steadied Pickett while he climbed into the trousers; then she asked him where he had obtained the garments.

"I don' know," he told her sadly. "Ish all my fault! I did it! All thosh monkish! The little ones"—he held his hands apart to show her how big—"came out my pockets. You saw 'em come out my pockets?"

Dorothy frowned at him. There was something intangible in all this.

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"But I didn' wanna do it!" protested Pickett, mistaking the meaning of her frown. "They jus' come, thash all! They kep' comin' out and comin' out, but when I look they're gone. And then there'sh more!"

Pickett began an inebriated sobbing, and Dorothy shook him and told him to be still. Where *had* those damned monkeys come from; and this suit? Dorothy wondered if she were dreaming, and would presently fall through bottomless and nightmarish space to awake, heart leaping, in her own bed at home. She wasn't drunk—she'd only had one or two drinks—and certainly *all* of those monkeys couldn't have escaped from the cages in the walls! Why, the zoo itself hadn't that many living monkeys!

But such speculations were fruitless, particularly at this stage. She very prudently put the matter aside, and gave her attention to getting them out.

THIS OBJECT was not to be gained without further adventure, as their next encounter told them. On the floor below there was a scurrying to and fro of hotel officials, police, firemen, hospital interns, doctors, lawyers, secretaries, and other important individuals. These gentlemen with one accord forsook their various tasks and activities when, from the door to the stairs, a gray coat and a pair of pants to match came gliding out into the corridor! It was a sight they were not soon to forget, although no one present ever believed the stories told of this event.

The coat and pants were separated. Not only was the coat above the trousers—it was also three or four feet to one side. And while the coat moved gracefully forward, except for abrupt gestures of the arms, the pants staggered drunkenly this way and that!

The pants would lurch off to the left; an arm of the coat would go out, reaching to the empty space above the empty seat. Then, as though drawn somehow by the coat sleeve, the pants would gravitate back toward the coat again!

Guests of the hotel were mingled with the others in the corridor, and when this sedate coat and waltzing pair of pants came on the scene there was immediate work and to spare for the doctors and interns present! Some really beautiful cases of hysteria were launched. More considerate ladies simply drooped and fainted. One man was moved to prophesy the immediate advent of doomsday. Others swore off drink.

The police, after one long breathless moment of utter unbelief, made a courageous dash for the animated garments.

A sergeant reached them first; and was roundly pommeled, tripped, and addressed in turn by a drunken male voice, and a clear feminine one. The male voice wanted to know who he thought he was pushing, while the feminine one ordered him to keep his hands to himself!

In getting to his feet he interfered with his fellows, and the coat and pants dashed back to the stair door from which they had emerged.

"Wash a matta with them fellas?" demanded Pickett, truculently. "Who

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they think they pushin', huh? Goin' to tell the first police oshifur I see, I am!"

Dorothy guided him down the steps. There had been something very, very strange in the behavior of those people; something unnatural. The way their eyes had followed their clothing for example, ignoring their features entirely. She examined the coat she wore and the well-pressed pants that were so very much out of place as a part of Pickett's ruined habiliment. They looked ordinary enough to her, and unworthy of the excitement they had seemed to produce. Detainment by the police was to be expected, but hardly a frenetic uproar, in view of events, over the clothes they wore!

She went down the steps, and advanced tentatively into the corridor of the floor below. Two Negro porters vouchsafed them a glance; then fled away with a grim, silent, singleness of purpose. A policeman came into the corridor, stopped as though struck, ejaculated: "Merciful Heaven!" and went for his gun.

Dorothy whipped around, swinging Pickett in a breathless arc as she made the turn, and went down the stairwell like a hunted fox. She hit about every fourth step of the flight down to the next floor; Pickett touched hardly any. They lit in a sprawling tangle on the landing.

Behind them an excited confabulation broke out, as the officer with the gun met their pursuers from the upper floor, but the two adventurers didn't await the results of this conference. Dorothy sprang resiliently to her feet, her grip on Pickett unrelaxed, and plunged resolutely into the corridor, depending on the surprise their appearance created to get them past any interference. Fortunately, the corridor was empty.

WITHOUT hesitation, Dorothy dashed into the first lavatory they encountered, and slammed the door behind her, and leaned breathlessly against it.

When she released her grip on him, Pickett slid with majestic deliberation to a sitting position on the floor, his back against the door. For him, the small room was spinning like a mechanistic nightmare.

Dorothy stirred first. She examined the room. It contained no one but themselves, so she locked the door, removed the gray coat and went to the basin set against the wall.

The shocks she had already sustained were as nothing to that which she now experienced. A mirror was fixed to the wall behind the basin, and although she stood directly before it, it reflected nothing at all but the bare walls and fixtures of the room! Dorothy shook her head, slapped her face, and looked again. The mirror still coldly insisted she wasn't there! She examined her own sturdy body, pinched herself.

"I don't believe it!" she said flatly.

"Don' believe wha'?" asked Pickett. The room was slackening speed now, and he caught occasional glimpses of some living creature in the skelter of objects whirling 'round him. It went by too fast for him to get any clear impression of what it was, but it *did* look frightening, being striped and

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splotched with many colors, and in weird patterns. He thought it might be one of the natives of the jungle—or was it jungles?—through which he had passed somewhere and sometime in this incredible night.

Dorothy glanced over at him. "Never mind," she said. One thing at a time; and, visible or invisible, ghost or mortal, she was going to get some of this detestable, this unbearable, muck and filth off her. She went to work, and work it was! A bathtub and a scrubbing brush was what was needed, but Dorothy was a notably determined individual—a trait not uncommon in the female—and, what with plenty of lather and the employment of the cleanest of the garments left her as wash rags, she was very nearly immaculate again before she concluded operations on herself and began on Pickett. That unfortunate individual, in no condition to resist, was very nearly drowned, and just a little sobered, before his appearance satisfied her.

"Towel!" gasped Pickett, when he was finally released. He leaned forward, reaching blindly, his eyes shut tight. "Where'sh a tow'l?"

"There isn't any," said Dorothy. "Now listen, get outa those pants! I'm going to go out and get us some clothes, and I'll need the whole suit. You stay here and lock the door. Can you do that? I'll knock three times when I get back so you'll know it's me."

"I wanta towel!" stated Pickett firmly, ignoring all this. And a towel materialized, with a slow crackling, in his hands.

"Thanksh," Pickett said politely, from the creamy foam of the thick towel. Dorothy, bereft of speech, mouth open, stared at him.

Pickett's mild brown eyes came up over the crest of the wave of towel, and blinked near-sightedly at her. She went slowly over to the door, where the gray coat hung, and got his glasses from the pocket in which she had placed them before Pickett's ablutions had been begun. They had remained, either miraculously or by reason of the charm, unbroken throughout their adventures.

She handed them to him, and he put them on, and stared at her. "Where'sh your closhe?" he asked, surprised.

"Never mind that," Dorothy told him. She took the towel away. "Look. Get another towel."

"Where?" asked Pickett, reasonably.

"Just say, 'I want a towel'!" ordered Dorothy.

"I wanta towel," repeated Pickett, obediently, but with a befuddled expression. Another towel crackled into existence, faster this time. Pickett sprang away from it in alarm, but Dorothy caught it before it could fall on the sopping floor. They both studied it carefully. It was a perfectly ordinary towel.

"Boy!" breathed Dorothy. "Boy, oh, boy! Either I'm dreaming, I'm drunk, or I'm nuts! Or you're Old Man Moe himself! How do you work this stuff?"

Pickett backed up against the door. "I can't help it! Ish all my fault! And now there'll be monkish!" He stared fearfully around the room. "And

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mice and birds and monkish! They keep comin' and comin' outa my pockets—"

Dorothy was deep in her towel. Her voice emerged from it muffled but commanding. "Forget it!" she ordered. "A few more monkeys won't make any difference, after what we've been through! Now, look; you say, 'I wish I had a dress'— No. Say, 'I wish I had a beautiful white fraille gown, with a bustle edged in black ostrich feathers; and a jacket of stone marten'— Oh, you'd never be able to say that! Look, just say, 'I wish I had a white evening gown and a fur jacket for Dorothy'!"

Dorothy got her gown, and her fur jacket; added a few orders for more intimate parts of feminine apparel that produced articles as surprising to Pickett as any mouse or monkey; and suggested, as she arrayed herself, that Pickett discard the gray suit and fit himself out more sumptuously. As she got into the gown she gave specific orders about his dress, and finished up by getting him with difficulty into the shirt, collar, and tie.

When she had finished, except for a few bumps and discolorations, they were a handsome couple—she in her white gown, very similar to the one she had worn at the beginning of the evening, and Pickett spotless in top hat and tails.

Her greatest difficulty had been with her hair; she had cleansed it thoroughly, and dried it as well as she was able, but it was impossible to get it

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completely dry, so she piled it on top of her head, making an up hair-do that concealed the dampest curls, and gave her a regal appearance.

Except that his legs retained stubborn wills of their own, and that the room persisted in indulging in abrupt, angular lurches, Pickett felt more composed than at any time since the plague of monkeys. Dorothy propped him against the wall and went back to the mirror.

A white evening gown was reflected, standing emptily erect. No wonder, thought Dorothy, that their appearance on the floors above had excited comment! Escape would be easy, invisible. All she had to do was to take off the dress and walk out. But, aside from all other and possibly more important considerations, Dorothy was a woman with a new dress. She wanted to be seen!

"Say, 'I wish we were visible,'" she said, turning to Pickett.

Pickett stared at her glassily. "You're 'ntoshicated," he told her. "Thash wash . . . that's what's amatter with you! You oughta be home in bed—"

"Say it!"

"All righ'! All righ'! I wish we were visible! Now lesh get outa here! What we standin' here for? I gotta tell Mrs. Hennerson somethin'—"

Dorothy returned her gaze to the mirror. As she had expected, she and the glass were now in agreement on the question of her actuality. Both she and the evening gown were reflected by it. This matter of visibility was, for Dorothy, simply another in the long series of mysteries with which this night seemed replete. It was equally incomprehensible with the rest, so she wasted no time on useless reflection. But she did take a few moments for final adjustments on her hair, during which Pickett elaborated upon the somewhat foggy explanations he was preparing for Mrs. Henderson.

Dorothy's last order was for a thousand dollars. As a result of this wish, the unusual and ill-formed wallet was returned to Pickett, stuffed with its former lunatic assortment of monies. Dorothy examined the coins and paper money without disappointment. "I thought that was too much to wish for!" she remarked.

She separated the negotiable money from the rest, and divided the spoils equally with Pickett. Then she unlocked the door and peeped out. The corridor was still deserted. She whisked Pickett and herself into the hallway. They strolled casually to the stairs—Dorothy strolled; with Pickett it was a kind of sailorlike roll—and sedately made their way to the street floor.

As THEY went down, Wisken and his deputies rode up on the roof of an elevator. In the roof garden the imps surveyed the now relatively quiet scene of battle. Police and firemen, and attendants summoned from the Zoological Society, pursued a last few apes and monkeys through the wilderness of wreckage, trapping them with nets. Photographers were flashing photofloods, and cursing their luck that they hadn't arrived earlier, when the festivities had been in progress. Laborers were making an uncertain and

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discouraged beginning at cleaning up the fabulous ruin. And hotel officials were wringing their hands, and sweating profusely, in anticipation of a storm of lawsuits.

"Goot Gott!" breathed Wisken softly.

"'E's been 'ere, orl right," said another imp.

"Goom on!" gritted Wisken. "Ven I get dot Bickedd— Ach! Hurry up! Nexzd I subbose he pring dinosaurs and elumphunts! Goom on, boys! Ve got to gatch him!"

The lobby of the hotel, on the street floor, was a dense, milling mass of official humanity, with a leaven of civilians in evening dress. Dorothy and Pickett attracted no attention as they made a dignified but slightly lurching exit.

Outside, the street was crowded with black Marias, fire trucks, ambulances, caged wagons sent by the zoo, other vehicles, and a mob of spectators, held back by a cordon of police. Floodlights on adjacent buildings, and on police cars, brilliantly illuminated the scene.

Pickett surprised himself by bursting into a raucous, unsteady, and inaccurate rendition of the policeman's song, from the "Pirates of Penzance."

"Take one consideration with another!
Tarantara, tarantara!
A pleeceman's lot is not a happy one!
Tarantara!"

They were passed through the crowd with grins from the police, and hoarse advice and uncouth criticism from the public.

When they had gotten a block away, and rounded a corner, Dorothy heaved a sigh of relief. She sat Pickett on a step, and stretched weary muscles.

"I need a drink," she said, "if anybody ever did! And I know a place that'll still be open. We'll sit here till a cab comes along."

"A drink!" Pickett suddenly remembered. "Yesh! I'm goin' t' get a drink! I'm shelebrating, I am! I'm goin' to have a Shingapore Shin Ging . . . Slin Jing—"

"You're celebrating, all right!" agreed Dorothy grimly. "And, boy! what a head you're going to have! O. K., you can have another drink. One more won't make much difference as far as you're concerned!"

Wisken rounded one corner just as the cab they got into turned the other. His fat little legs trotted tirelessly along. His round nose twitched and sniffed, as though he followed a scent left on the air by the charm. Behind him trotted his deputies.

AT THE secluded bar in the private club to which Dorothy took him, Pickett had not one but two Gin Slings, and was refused a new drink he discovered on the list—a "zombie." The bartender regarded him sourly, but, having met Joe, Pickett was immune henceforth to all bartenders.

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The alcohol took effect on the charm as well as Pickett, and it stirred a little, and lost some of its trepidation. A white dove burst with a flurry of wings from his top hat, which stood upside down on the bar. It fluttered around the quiet room, bringing the other patrons to their feet.

"What the hell!" said the barkeep, dangerously.

Wisken and his imps arrived at that moment at the street door, and the charm sensed their presence, and knew that its hour of freedom was over.

"We'd better be going," said Dorothy, nervously. She glanced from the swooping bird to Pickett.

With exaggerated caution, Pickett crept close to his hat and peered within. "No monkish!" he announced, and relaxed with a sigh of relief.

"Come on," urged Dorothy, gripping his arm.

But before she could pull him away he stiffened to a vibrant internal buzzing. It was, the charm knew, its final performance as a free agent, and it made it good!

There was a pale, blue flash and a sound like ripping silk; and then, from behind the bar, fountained a perfect menagerie of small mammals! They sprang up on all sides of the speechless barman—mice, chipmunks, shrews, moles, squirrels, hedgehogs; Walt Disney rabbits, with cherubic expressions; a pair of cunning-faced red foxes that departed instantly and silently; three bandit-masked raccoons and a bad-tempered opossum; two irritated and dangerous skunks; a sleepily surprised woodchuck; and lastly, and utterly undisturbed by its advent, a daft-looking brown cat.

"This," said Dorothy, faintly, "is where we came in!"

Pickett saw her coming, and grabbed his hat, and closed his eyes. He was instantly in violent motion. It was all too familiar to Pickett. The bartender was batting furiously about him, and bellowing for "Slugzy," and "Moish."

They could still hear him as they whirled out into the street. "Get them!" he was yelling. "Look at this place! Look out! That's a skunk you're tryin' to boot! Holy jumpin'—"

Slugzy and Moish made a heroic effort to apprehend the culprits, but Wisken and his imps disposed of them swiftly and efficiently as the two strong-arm men emerged from the door. They were accompanied by a very representative "Small Mammal House" collection, that fanned out when it hit the street, and quickly disappeared in the night.

Wisken, shooting blue sparks like a generator in a dark room, took after the fugitives.

They dodged around a couple of corners, then Dorothy halted. Pickett sagged limply against her. She propped him against a wall and addressed him earnestly. "Listen. You gotta quit that! Who do you think you are, anyway—Frank Buck?"

"Can't help it!" gasped Pickett. "'Sh all my fault, but I can't help it! They jus' come, thass all!"

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IT WAS that hour of the morning that is most quiet. Dawn was not far away, but the sky was profoundly dark beyond a foam of stars. The night wind, cold and restless, hunted dead leaves down the silent street.

A cruising taxi, its driver watchful for such late revelers, slowed invitingly at the curb. Dorothy nodded to the driver, who halted his cab. He leaned out and opened a rear door, and studied Pickett, as he was bundled into the back, with awed admiration.

"Geez!" he whispered hoarsely to Dorothy. "He's *stinkin'* drunk, ain't 'e?"

"1710 Bartram Terrace," said Dorothy. "And skip the ad libbing!"

The cab slid away from the curb. Upon its roof sat Wisken and three of his deputies. The other two, accompanied by a squad of the local imp constabulary, were in another part of town, in pursuit of Rivkin.

"Virst, t' charm," said Wisken. "Marlybone, you ko down und get it!"

One of the imps dropped over the side, and swung in at a window.

Dorothy jerked away from Pickett as a pale, trembling little ball of light emerged from his chest and darted out the window, and up over the top of the cab. She peered out all of the windows, but saw it no more. Pickett, released from her grip, flopped loosely about with the motion of the cab.

Dorothy turned and stared at him—put her ear to his chest. He was certainly alive. She shrugged. After all they'd been through, what was a blob of light? She caught hold of him again, steadying his limply bouncing body.

On the roof of the cab, Wisken carefully placed the charm in a small box, bound with iron, and inscribed with much fine writing. He locked the box and pronounced a spell over it. He was taking no further chances.

"Now, den!" said Wisken. "I ko down und vigs dot Bickedd! I t'ink I pronounze t' vourteenth curse of the Voivode of Sakieh on him! Blitzen! I stir him ub, I betchoo!"

"Yeah, but, chief," said Marlybone, "he ain't done nuffin, really. He ain't even know he got t' charm! Whatsa use a bumpin' him around?"

"Yeah, chief," joined in another imp named Miles. "Marly's right. Rivkin's the bloke we want!"

"Dot is true," agreed Wisken, after a moment's musing. "Berhaps I'm a liddle too hazty. I don't pronounze the curse. But ve take from him the clothes and t' monies the charm give him. Und I tell you vot else—ve marry him to t'is voman he have vith him!"

"Ow!" said Marlybone. "'Fy was 'im, I'd take t' curse!"

"Whatcha wanta punish him for, anyway, chief?" asked Miles.

Wisken's beard bristled, and the blue sparks racing around his rotund body increased their frequency. "Dere iss brought to our attenzhun," he stated portentously, "a human, who, if he iss nodding else, iss overweening! Ve haff neider t' time nor the interest to inqvire into his odder defects, vich, being human, he moost haff in goot meazhure. So ve marry him. Marrich

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vill eider correct dose defects, or it vill bunish him vhenefer he induches t'em! Alzo, it vill be goot for his soul!"

THE CAB drew to a halt under a street light. A long row of apartment houses, dark and silent, raised blank faces high into the shadows. Dorothy got out and paid the driver; and he descended from his seat to assist her with Pickett.

Four solemn little men suddenly flipped into visibility, grouped around them. Dorothy, in spite of her experiences of the night, squealed. The taxi driver stared, took off his cap, scratched his head, and said with mournful astonishment: "Geezil! He gets stinkin' drunk, and *I* see little men!"

"Be qviet, vellow!" ordered Wisken. "Ve are *not* men! Stant aside! Both of you!" He advanced upon them with authority, and made to enter the cab.

"Wait a minute, Whiskers," said Dorothy, stepping between him and the door of the taxi. "What do you want in there?"

"Viskers!" Van der Wisken bounced a foot in the air, the fat sparks snapping around him. His black beard waggled furiously. "My name iss Joost Van der Visken, young voman! I am der mayor, der chief of bolice, und chairman of city council of my communiddy! Und you call me 'Viskers!'"

"I know what you birds are!" interrupted Dorothy. "You're wee folk! My grandmother used to tell me about the wee folk. Up to now I always thought she was handing me a line!"

"Your grandmutter vas a voman of goot zense," grumbled Wisken, "vhich iss more dan can be zaid for her grantdaughter! Now stant aside, und let me get at dot Bickedd! He iss to be bunished!"

"Punished? What for?" Dorothy didn't move.

Wisken told her, with some heat, what for; reciting the theft of the charm; its desertion in Pickett's interior; and reviewing the subsequent events with which she was already familiar.

"So *that's* the answer to all the funny stuff that's been going on!" exclaimed Dorothy, when he had finished. "*I* had an idea that I'd soon be getting a hydrotherapeutic treatment, and saying, 'Good morning, doctor!'"

"Und now get oud of my vay, und let me at dot Bickedd!"

"What for? It wasn't his fault!"

"That's what we say, lady," chimed in Miles, "but the chief—"

"I vill nod go into all dot again—"

"Just what do you think you're going to do to him?" asked Dorothy.

"Virst I take the money and t' clothes he get vrom t' charm. Then ve marry you und him!"

"Hey!" exclaimed Dorothy heatedly. "When you say that, Whiskers, smile!"

"Viskers!" howled the chief of police.

"Are you saying it would be a punishment to marry me, you over-

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stuffed little imp! What about me? Saddled with some drunken, good-for-nothing man! It would be me that would be punished!"

Wisken forgot his anger. He shook his bushy head sadly. "Marrich is neffer a bunishment for vemales like you! I know! I married von! It iss an obbordunity!"

"How do you know he isn't married already?" asked Dorothy.

"Oh, ve haff our methods. Ve know who you are, und vot your name iss, and that you're zingle, und all dot. Ve know der same aboud him."

"Well, in that case, I might go along with you. If he's as nice a guy sober as he is drunk— But what about the license? You can't get married without a license. And it would have to be dated three days ago."

"T' license? Pfooie!" Wisken patted the box that held the charm. "You forget the charm?" He muttered over the box and then extended his hand. A marriage license appeared in it. "Dere you are. Lookg at id! Dated t'ree days ako, signed, witnessed, everyt'ing. Und in der cidy hall your names vill be entered joost as if you goné dere!"

DOROTHY TOOK the paper and studied it. "Henry A. Pickett. Well, it's nice to know the name of the guy you're going to marry. Whiskers—Visken, I mean, I'll do it! It seems to me I've been taking care of Hank for years—saving him from bartenders, monkeys, wild women, and Heaven-knows-what! I've gotten used to it. And as long as he isn't married, I'll tell you I've fallen hard for the poor old souse! He's so darn dopey-looking! It hit me when I first saw him, sitting there at that table, checking off drinks on the menu. And he just needs somebody like me to take care of him!"

"Goot!" interrupted Wisken, anxious to get on with the business. "Dot's vine! Und now ve take his money, und his soot—"

"Wa-ait a minute, Toots!" Dorothy put her hands on her hips and stared full in Wisken's hairy face. "Didn't I tell you my grandmother told me all about the wee folk?"

"Zhoor, but I am Van der Wisken! I shoot der 'legtric spargs! I'm der mayor, der—"

"She made me memorize a lot of spells and incantations! She told me plenty, Visken!"

"Zhe dit!" Wisken looked thoughtful. "Zhe tolt you all dot, eh? Dit zhe tell you der spell dot begins, '*Stat magni nominis umbra*?"

"Told me that one, and lots more!"

"Vell," said Wisken, considering the matter very seriously, "maype ve cood skib der money und der soot. T'boys zay I'm too hazty, und dey might be right! Zhoor! After all, Bickedd will haff enough tr—"

"What's that!"

"Nodding! Nodding!" said Wisken, hastily. "Now, lookg. You take t'iss tagzi cab. Ve go on der top. Ve see dot der cleric marries you. T'iss man, der driver, be your vitness."

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"Say, what is this, anyway?" asked that worthy, looking rather wild-eyed. "Am I going nuts, or is this some kind of an act?"

"Here," said Dorothy, handing him a twenty-dollar bill. "You've got a poor memory, Jack, did you know that? All you'll remember about this fare is that you got a good tip—right?"

The driver accepted the money, and tucked it carefully away. "O. K., sister. I'll go wit'cha. Tomorra I won't believe I seen these little guys anyway!"

Dorothy peered into the cab. "He's out cold, Visken. Can the charm wake him up long enough to get married?"

"Zhoor. Vot you think's been keeping him going zo far?" Wisken produced the box and muttered over it as before. "I vigs him ub zo he nod be sickg, eider. But I can't stob him being very drunk—awful drunk!"

"After what he's taken aboard I doubt if anything short of the clap of doom could stop him from being drunk! Say, Visken"—Dorothy turned to him suddenly—"you know all about Hank. What's he do? What's his business?"

"He's an aut'or. He ride shtories."

"Oh," said Dorothy, flatly. "Well, it doesn't make any difference. I've got a good job."

There was a stirring in the cab, and Pickett's pale face was framed in the doorway. "Will you drunks ge' 'way from here," he demanded, "and let deshent people sleep!"

"HEY, Ed!" bellowed a nice voice from the shadows beyond the arc light. There was a pounding of heavy feet. A fat man—none other than Mr. George B. Baker, the paint salesman—charged out of the night. He galloped up to the cab, and hauled Pickett out, ignoring Dorothy, the driver, and the four imps. "Ed, I been lookin' all over fer yu! Where yu been, huh? The' was a riot at the Monkey Bar! Didja know that? And a hell of a fuss it was, too! When I come back you was gone, and I been lookin' fer you ever since—"

"You're making a mistake," interrupted Dorothy. "This is my fiancé, and his name's not Ed. Furthermore, you can't tell us anything about the Monkey Bar—"

"Ish m' ol' frien' Mr. Baker!" said Pickett happily. "Lesh have another o' the same! Ishis Dorofy, Mr. Baker," he added, not forgetting the proprieties. He staggered over to her, and Dorothy caught him as his knees buckled. "Wan'cha meet Dorofy! Nicest girl ever met in m' life, George!"

"So you're Baker," acknowledged Dorothy. "Hank was telling me about you. Well, you can be a witness at our wedding. We're starting right now. Come on, get in."

"But wait!" Baker dug down in a voluminous pocket and came up with the bottle of lemon paint. "I got somethin' here I gotta talk to— You say 'is name's Hank? Funny! I had an idea it was Edgar. Well, anyway, this

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here paint, now. Hank gave it to me, and I got mu boss outa bed to show it to 'im. And the lousy bum said I was drunk! But he didn't think I was drunk when we got it analyzed! It's something new! An' I got a contrac' right here in mu pocket! If mu friend Hank owns the formula, we c'n get right down to business. We'll buy it outright, or we'll give'm a royalty—"

Dorothy took the bottle; looked at it and then at Wisken. She favored the imp with a sidelong wink. He shrugged, and made a disclaiming gesture.

"I'm taking care of Hank's affairs right now," said Dorothy, smoothly. "He's been celebrating—"

"He sure has," agreed Baker, admiringly. "He's got a skinful, all right!"

"Well, it's like this, Mr. Baker; Hank owns the rights in this paint, all right. But unfortunately the formula has been lost. We might be able to recover it, but could your laboratory work it out from this sample, if we can't?"

"Oh, sure! All we want's for him to assign us the rights, and give us assurance his title's clear."

"Good! Come on, then. You can be a witness, and afterward we'll work out this contract. It'll make a nice dowry," added Dorothy, thoughtfully, "although that sounds as though it were backward, or something."

"Well, lemme congratulate the happy groom!" bellowed Baker, getting into the cab. "And lemme tell you, you're one lucky girl! M' friend Hank's one o' the finest fellows I know! Yessir!"

Windows were banging up now, and petulant voices were making themselves heard. Dorothy stuffed Pickett into the cab, and climbed in after him. The driver nervously let the clutch out too fast, and the car leaped away. Wisken and his imps had to jump and scramble to get aboard the roof.

They turned the corner to meet the first rays of the rising sun, sparkling freshly along the empty street. It was going to be a beautiful day for a wedding.

Baker had a bottle with him, and shared it sociably. Pickett began teaching him his version of the policemen's song, and they set up a discordant howling. "Tarantara, tarantara!" brought more indignant heads to windows.

Dorothy listened indulgently. "Have a good time, Hank," she told him. "Because this is the last serious drinking you're going to do for a while! You'll be a married man soon, and you'll probably have to learn to cook!"

"You vas right, boys," said Wisken, on the roof. He sighed, almost with sympathy. "He haff plenty trouble now, all right!"

The cab rattled erratically away along the sunlit street. It grew smaller with distance; then turned a corner and was lost to view.

Pickett had one more surprise in store for him. When the wedding party arrived at last, after the ceremony, at the old, colonial house on Jefferson Square, he found Mrs. Henderson, for the first time in his experience, speechless.

THE END.

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THE ULTIMATE EGOIST

by E. HUNTER WALDO

If's a bad idea, perhaps, to question too closely the reality of the world about you. Maybe it isn't—

Illustrated by Schneeman

So I was holding forth as usual, finding highly audible reasons for my opinion of myself. I could do that with Judith. She was in love with me, and women in love are funny that way. You can tell them anything about yourself,

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and as long as it's a build-up they'll believe it. If they can't, they'll sure try.

We were walking down to the lake for a swim. What got me started in this vein—should I say "vain"?—was the fact that Judith looked so wonderful. She was a brunette, who was a deep redhead when she was close by, which she usually was, and turned blond when the sun hit her. Lovely. Her transparent skin seemed proof that her flesh was rose-ivory all the way through, and she had long, green eyes. She moved like a hawk tilting against the wind and she loved me. Wonderful. Since I was thinking about wonderful things I just naturally began talking about myself, and Judith held my hand and skipped along beside me and agreed with everything I said, which was as it should be.

"Let me put it this way," I spouted. "The world and the universe are strictly as I see them. I see no fallacy in the supposition that if I disbelieve in any given object, theory, or principle, it does not exist."

"You've never seen Siam, darling," said Judith. "Does that mean that Siam does not exist?" She was not disagreeing with me, but she knew how to keep me talking. That was all right because we enjoyed hearing me talk.

"Oh, Siam can exist if it wants," I said generously, "providing I have no reason to doubt its existence."

"Ah," she said. She hadn't exactly heard all this before because I expressed myself with a high degree of originality on the subject. There were so many ins and outs to my faceted personality that I found my ego quite inexhaustible. Judith giggled.

"Suppose you really and truly doubted Siam, Woodie."

"That would be tough on the Siamese."

She laughed outright and I joined her, because if I had not she would have been laughing *at* me, and that would have been unthinkable.

"Darling," she said, pulling my head down so she could bite my ear; "you're marvelous. Do you mean to tell me in so many words that you created this whole layout? These old trees, that sprouted so many years before you were born; the stars and that nice, warm, old sun, and the flow of sap, and life itself; wasn't that quite a job, toots?"

I looked at her blankly. "Not at all. Truly, darling, I have never seen or heard or read anything to disprove my belief that this universe is my product, and mine alone. Look, I exist. I can take that as a basic fact. I observe that I have a particular form: hence there must be a physical environment to suit it."

"How about the possibility that your . . . er . . . exquisite form might be the *result* of your physical environment?"

"Don't interrupt," I said patiently. "Don't be sarcastic and above all don't be heretical. Now.

"Since my existence requires a certain set of circumstances, those circumstances must necessarily exist to care for me. The fact that part of those circumstances are century-old trees and ageless heavenly bodies is a matter of little importance except in so far as it is a credit to the powers of my fertile imagination."

"*Whew!*" she murmured and let go my hand. "You're strong."

"Thank you, darling. Do you see my point?"

"In theory, o best beloved. My, how you do go on. But—what's to prevent

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my thinking that the universe is a figment of *my* imagination?"

"Nothing. But that's a bit ridiculous since I happen to know that *I* dreamed it all up."

"I'll be damned," she said. She could say things like that because she looked so young and sweet that most people simply wouldn't believe it was she who spoke. "I'll be *very* bedamned," she said, and added a sentence, under her breath, that contained the word "insufferable." I imagine she was talking about the weather.

We walked along, and she plucked a leaf of sassafras and chewed on it. The leaf was the kind of green against her lips that showed how red her lips were against her cheeks. "Wouldn't it be funny," she said after a bit, "if all that nonsense you drool were true, and things just stopped *being* when you doubted them?"

"Please!" I said sharply, changing my bathing trunks from my right hand to my left so I could raise a more admonitory finger at her. "Nonsense? Drool? Explain yourself, Judith!"

"Oh, stop it!" she shouted, quite taking me aback. "I love you, Woodie," she went on more quietly, "but I think you're a conceited ass. Also, you talk too much. Let's sing songs or something."

"I do not feel like singing," I said coldly, "when you act so hysterically unfair. You can't disprove a thing I've said."

"And you can't prove it. Please, Woodie—I don't want to fight. This is a summer vacation and we're going swimming today and I love you and I agree with everything you say. I think you're marvelous. Now for Heaven's sake *will* you talk about something else for a change?"

"I can't prove it, hm-m-m?" I said darkly, ignoring all the rest of what she had said.

She clapped two slim hands to her head and said in a monotone.

"The moon is made of green cheese. It isn't, but if it did happen to be, and you found it out, then it certainly would be. I am going nuts. I am going to gnash my teeth and paw the air and froth at the mouth and you make me SICK!"

"Your reasoning is typically feminine," I told her. "Spectacular but highly inaccurate. My point is this." I ignored her moans. "Since I am the creator of all this"—I made an inclusive gesture—"I can also be its destroyer. A case in point—we'll take that noble old spruce over there. I don't believe in it. It does not exist. It is but another figment of my imagination, but it is one without a rational explanation. I do not see it any more because it is not there. It could not be there. It's a physical and psychic impossibility. It—" At last I yielded to her persistent yanking on my elbow.

"Woodie," she gasped. "It's gone! Th-that tree! It's . . . oh, Woodie! I'm scared! What happened?"

"Well, of course it's—" My lips flapped helplessly a couple of times. Then, "It's *what?*"

She pointed wordlessly at the new clearing in the copse.

"I dunno. I—" I wet my lips and tried again. "My God," I said very quietly. "Oh, my God." I was shaking and stone-cold in the hot sun, and my throat was tight. Judith had bruised my arm with her nails; I felt it sharply when she let me go and stood back from me. It wasn't the disappearance of a

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thousand board feet of good spruce that bothered me particularly. After all, it wasn't my tree! But—oh, my God!

I looked at Judith and was suddenly conscious that she was about to run away from me. I put out my arms, and she ran into them instead. She cried then. We both knew then who—what—I was; neither of us would admit it. But, anyway, she cried. You know, I was quite a fellow. The miracle of growth was my invention, and the air was warm and the sky blue for me alone, and the moon was silver and the sun golden, all for me. The earth would quake beneath my feet if I so chose, and a supernova was but a flash in my brainpan. And yet when Judith cried in my arms I just didn't know what to do. We sat down together on a rock beside the road and she cried because she was scared and I patted her shoulder and felt perfectly lousy. I was scared, too.

What was real? I dropped my fingers to the stone and stroked its mossy coolth. Something that was all legs scuttled out from under my fingertips. I glanced down at it. It was red-brown and shiny and rather horrible. What peculiar ideas I did have at times!

The stone, for instance. It didn't *have* to be there. It wasn't necessary to me, save as a minor element in a pretty bit of scenery that I appreciated. I might just as well not—

"Uff," said Judith, and bit her lip as she plumped down on the bare earth where that stone had been.

"Judith," I said weakly as I climbed to my feet and helped her up. "That was a . . . a trick."

"I didn't like it," she said furiously through some brisk lip-rubbing. "Oooh." Not her lip this time.

"I didn't do anything," I said plaintively. "I just . . . it just—"

"I know, I know," she said acidly. "Let's see you put it back, smart man. Go ahead—don't stand there looking so helpless! Go on!" My beloved one, I gathered, was annoyed!

I tried. I tried with everything I had, and, do you know, I couldn't put it back? Truly. It wasn't there, that's all. You have to have some belief in a thing before you can even imagine it; you have to allow for its possibility. That stone was gone, and gone for good. It was terrifying. It was something more inevitable, more completely final, than death.

AFTERWARD we walked along together. Judith clung to my hand all the way down to the lake. She was considerably shaken. I wasn't. This thing was like a birthmark with me. I hadn't quite realized I was this way until that day; and then I just had the feeling, "I'll be damned, it's true after all."

It was true, and as time went on I realized more and more what was going to happen because of it. I was so certain that I couldn't even worry about it. For your own piece of mind, I'd try to get in the same frame of mind, if I were you. I know what I am talking about, because I am you, being as to how you are all figments of my imagination. Gee, I have some peculiar ideas sometimes!

So there we were down at the lake, and as long as I was with Judith I was all right. She kept me from thinking about anything but her own magnificent self, and that was what was required to maintain the status quo. Anything I doubted had no chance to exist. I couldn't doubt Judith. Not then I couldn't. Ah, what a beauty she was! Too bad about Judith—

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I stood there watching her diving. She was a wonder. Only gal I ever met who could do a two and a half off a twelve-foot board and not get paid for it. Maybe she could fly like that because she was half angel. I noticed Monte Carleau looking at her, too, through his expensive polarized sun glasses. I went over to him and took the glasses away from him.

I didn't like Monte. I guess I envied him that long, brown chassis of his, and his blue-black hair. I can admit things like that now.

"Hey!" he barked, grabbing for the specs. "What's the grand idea?"

I put on the glasses and watched Judith, who was poised for a cutaway, up there on the twelve-foot, and I talked to Monte over my shoulder. "I don't like you," I told him. "I don't like your staring at Judith. And I don't like to see you wearing glasses on account of because I feel like poking every time I see you and I'd hate to hit a guy with glasses on."

Judith did her cutaway and it was a dandy. Then Monte grabbed my shoulder and twisted me around. He was thirty pounds heavier than I and one of those guys who takes credit to himself for being what he was born as. "Gettin' big, hey?" he barked. His lips were very white. "Little ol' Woodie, a tough guy after all these years. What's that twist see in you, anyway? She sure shows bad taste."

"—and I don't like a guy that fights with his mouth," I said as if I hadn't been interrupted. I could just see Monte Carleau lying flat on his back with a busted jaw.

As a matter of fact I did see Monte Carleau lying on his back with a busted jaw. I shrugged and walked over to where Judith was climbing out of the water.

"What happened to the glamour boy?" she asked, seeing the brown carcass writhing on the bank.

"Oh, he just overlooked a possibility," I said.

"Woodie—you didn't hit him?"

"I don't rightly remember. Anyhow, he thought I couldn't flatten him and I thought I could. Ergo, he's flattened."

She looked startled. "Another . . . trick, Woodie?"

"Could be."

She stood there with the water dripping off her, smelling of wet wool and wonder, looking at her pointed nails. She was worried; and then she shrugged it off and reached for the glasses. "Give."

She put them on and looked out across the lake and gasped at the way the polarized glass killed the glare. "That *is* something. How does it work?" she asked me, in that tone of voice that only women in love can achieve, and which signifies, "You know this as well as everything else, you great, big, clever brute you."

I said vaguely, "Oh, it's something about making the lightwaves all vibrate in one plane. I dunno."

"It doesn't seem possible, does it?"

"No," I said. I'm pretty simple about things like that, anyway. As far as I was concerned it wasn't possible—

"Ouch!" she said. "Oooh. I was looking at that patch on the lake where all that sun glare is, and the glasses killed it, and all of a sudden it was there, just as if I hadn't the glasses on at all— Woodie! Was that another trick?" She snatched off the glasses and stared at me with her eyes very wide.

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I didn't say anything, just tried to think about something else.

"You've ruined a good pair of sun glasses," she said.

"I've ruined an industry, I'm afraid."

She twitched the glasses into the lake and crinkled up the smoothness over her eyes. "Woodie—this was funny for a while. I . . . I'm scared now. I can't help it."

I spread my hands. "I can't help it, either. Honestly, darling. It's just that since I figured something out up the trail there, anything I don't believe just . . . isn't. Just *can't be!*"

She looked at me and shook her head so that her long, green eyes slid back and forth. "I don't like it. I don't like it at all, Woodie."

"Can't be helped."

"Let's go back," she said suddenly, and went to the dressing cabins.

JUDITH CHANGED toward me a bit after that. I didn't bother about it at first. There were too many other things to worry about. I was looking at some pictures in a magazine one day, for instance, and ran across a picture of an albino catfish which had a profile like a shrimp and a skin like a cosmetic ad. Oddest thing I ever saw, and I couldn't be expected to believe it. A week later I read in the paper that the genus Clariidae had disappeared from the earth, simultaneously and with no apparent explanation, both from its natural habitat and from aquaria all over the world. I got quite a shock from that. You can imagine. Good thing I've got a matter-of-fact sort of mind.

Suppose I had been highly imaginative, now, like those bozoes who write stories for magazines. I might have believed in any old thing! "Ghosties an' ghoulies an' long-leggedy beasties, an' things that go boomp i' th' nicht—" as they put it in Scotland. People that believe in those things do see them, come to think of it. Maybe everybody is like me. Only they don't carry the realization far enough. I hope nobody does. Another like me would certainly complicate things. I've made enough of a hash of things. A nice, big, illimitably negative hash.

It didn't matter much what the circumstances were, I drove a hard bargain with the fates. I could accept things—anything—unless something gave me cause to doubt. For quite a while I didn't realize what this was leading me to; then I saw that every fact is based on incredibility. Take a fact; reason from it; sooner or later you'll run up against something a little hard to take. My particular egocentricity led me to disbelieve anything. I could not fully understand. For a lightweight like me that made my skepticism pretty inclusive after a while!

It started, as I've said, with disappearing trees and rocks and a busted jaw for Monte Carleau. But it got worse—bigger. I couldn't help it. It grew of its own accord. Because I had found one rock unbelievable, I couldn't quite see why any more could exist. I tried to stop it, but gosh, when you see a small hill suddenly flatten out because it was made of rock—well, you can't help but doubt the existence of *any* rock. I tapered it off for a while by thinking about other things, but in the back of my mind there was the feeling that the very earth I was on was merely a mental impression. We'll get back to that later. I know I did.

WHAT I did was to get away from that summer resort—and Judith. She

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was the sort to stick to a man, no matter what. I wanted to find out "what"!

She didn't want me to go. She was definite about it.

"Something's happened to you, Woodie," she said quietly as she systematically threw out all the clothes I put in my suitcase, just as systematically as I put them in. "I told you before I don't like it. Isn't that enough to make you stop?"

"I'm not doing anything I can stop," I said.

"I would stop," she said illogically, "if you asked *me* to."

"I told you, darling; I'm not *doing* anything. Things happen, that's all."

"Matter," she said suddenly, planting herself in front of me, "can be neither created nor destroyed."

I sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. She immediately sat beside, on, and around me. Sort of an affectionate somersault. "You been reading books," I said.

"Well, what about it? You're worried because things happen. You made a rock vanish. But you can't destroy matter. So you just couldn't have done it."

"I was there," I reminded her.

"That doesn't matter. It isn't logic." That from a woman was really something!

"You're overlooking one thing, irresistible creature," I said, pushing her away from me, "and that is the fact that I don't believe that precept about the destruction of matter, and never did. Therefore"—I spread my hands—"matter can be destroyed. Matter's just a figment of my imagination, anyway."

She opened and closed her lovely mouth twice and then said, "But in school—"

"*Damn* school!" I said. "Do I have to prove it to you?" I looked about the room for something to demonstrate on, but couldn't see anything offhand I could do without. I was traveling light. My eyes fell on her low-heeled pumps. "Look; you've lost your shoes some place, I'll wager."

"I have not! I . . . *eek!*"

"—and your stockings—"

"Woodie!"

"—and that cute little blue beret—"

"Woodie," she said firmly, standing barefoot, bare-legged, bare-headed before me, and clutching herself diffidently. "Stop. Stop right there! I concede you your point, you . . . you—"

"Go on."

"I won't now that you've stopped." And she blushed.

"Well, what do you think now?"

Now get this. She didn't say, "You're a beast." Or "Heel." Or "Shlemeil." She said, "I think you're wonderful, Woodie." And she ran out, crying.

I sat there for a long time and then I finished my packing.

When I got back to the city and into my room I felt much better. The way I was now, I had to have things around me that I knew and was used to. They lent solidity to a quivering universe. As long as they stood firm, the cosmos was safe.

My room was pretty nice. If you came to see me, we could drink coffee, if you didn't mind getting up every time I reached for the sugar. Small. The carpet was on the wall and there was a Navaho rug on the floor. Couple of pastels and a nice charcoal of Judith. Indirect lighting, which meant a disk of black cardboard hanging by rubber bands from the otherwise unshaded bulb. Books. A radio that was going twenty-four hours a day.

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Why should there be only twenty-four hours in a day?

I throttled the thought before it got anywhere.

I switched on both lights, the radio, and the hotplate under my coffee brewer. That humming noise was the meter turning like a phonograph playing the "Landlady's Blues."

WHILE I was hanging up my coat Drip burst in, bellowing. "Hiyah, Woodie! Hiyah, pal! Back, huh? What happened? Huh?"

I closed the closet, spun around and gave him the old one-two on the mouth and chin, planted a foot in his stomach and kicked him out in the hall. Opposite my door is what was first a crack, then a dent, now a hollow, in the plaster where the Dsi had continually hit it. I didn't have anything against him, but I'd told him to knock before he came in.

As soon as I closed the door he knocked timidly on it.

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

I opened up. "Oh, hello, Drip."

He came in and started his greetings and salutations all over again. Poor old Drip. He'd been pushed around by half the population from Eastport to Sandy Hook, and if he minded, he never showed it. He had a voice which was squeaky without being high, a curving stance that was not round-shouldered, a complexion which was pink without being healthy, shoulders that were broad but not strong, and an untruthful aggressive chin. The guy was whacked but harmless.

He asked me what I thought of him once and I said, "You? You're the Creator's hypothesis." He's still trying to figure it out, if he's where he can figure anything.

By the way, I think he was partly responsible for my discovering who I was. Drip was useful, in the sense that he could not be with anyone without making him feel superior. The fact that he felt correspondingly inferior was his hard luck. It was no one's fault that he pushed an eight-ball ahead of himself through life. Not even his.

He talked like this:

"Gee? Woodie? It's good to see you again? What are you going to do. Go back to work. Without? Finishing your vacation. Gee? Something must have . . . did you fight. With Judith. Gosh? Everything happens to you?"

"Do you want some coffee and stop cross-questioning me," I said.

"I'm sorry." The phrase was a mental reflex with him.

"What've you been doing with yourself, Drip?"

"Nothing? Nothing? Why are you? *Back*, Woodie."

"Well, I'll tell you." I scratched my head. "Oh, hell, never mind. Drip, I'm going to grab an oil can."

"Sh-ship out. On a tanker again? Oh, Woodie, you can't. *Do* that? I thought you'd quit going to sea."

"I can do anything," I said with conviction. "I'm . . . jittery around here, thassall."

He looked at the Arabian prayer rug on the wall and the way it was reflected in the big mirror across the room. "If you go, could I have your room," he whispered as if he were asking me to die for him.

"No, boy. I want you to come with me."

"What?" he screamed. "Me. On a ship? Oh, no. No no nonono!"

I POURED him a cup of coffee, thinking about the ships, thinking of the live

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surge of a steel deck, and the whip of a wind, and of a double rainbow by moonlight in the Caribbean. The pulsing rustle of valves and pistons. Aces backed up in a marathon stud game in the messroom. Heat in the fireroom, making your lungs too big for your chest. Breakdown in a hurricane off a rocky coast, and you smell death in the wind—death and kerosene. A load of high-test aviation gas, so your ship is a five-hundred-foot stick of dynamite. A Louisiana Cajun using his knife and a Boston Irishman using his feet. Breath of life, the very warmth in a man's blood, these things, once he's been to sea. Looking at Drip, putting sugar in his coffee for him, I felt suddenly sorry for him. I wanted to help him. I wanted to share what exultance I had known, in the days before I met Judith and dropped the anchor.

"Sure. Why not, Drip? I hit my first ship when I was sixteen, and I got treated all right."

"Oh, yes," he said without sarcasm, "you can do all sorts of things. Not me? I could never do the things you've done?"

"Nuts," I said. Being with Drip always did one of two things: made me think how wonderful I was, or how pathetic he was. This was the latter case. In trying to help him out a little, I completely forgot my new potentialities. That's where I made my mistake. "Look," I said, "why is it that you're afraid of the ghost of your own shadow? I think it's because you refuse to make the effort to overcome your fear. If you're afraid of the dark, turn the light out. If you're afraid of falling, jump off a roof. Just a little garage roof some place. If you're afraid of women, stick around them. And if you're afraid to ship out, for gosh sakes come along with me. I'll get a quartermaster's job and you can be ordinary seaman on my watch. I'll show you the ropes. But on any account, face your fear."

"That's the way you do things? Isn't it," he said almost adoringly.

"Well, sure. And you could if you tried. Come on, Drip. Make an effort."

His forehead crinkled up and he whined, "You don't know the kind of things I'm afraid of."

"Name 'em!"

"You'd laugh."

"No!"

"Well, like now, right outside the door, there's a . . . oh, it's horrible!"

I got up and opened the door. "There's nothing but some dirt that should have been swept up three days ago."

"You see?" he said. "You want me to see things your way and you can't begin to see the things I see." And he was so worked up, poor crazy fool, that he began to cry.

I put my hand on his shoulder, and making a real mental effort, said, "Drip, I'll see things the way you do. *I will!* I'll see everything with your eyes. I'll show you!"

Immediately the room seemed to shake itself; things wavered uncomfortably; then I realized that Drip was astigmatic. I also realized with a powerful shock that I had been nearly color blind. Compared with the vividness with which he saw things, at any rate. *Whew!*

And then I became conscious of the terrors—the million unidentifiable fears with which the poor dope had been living, day and night.

The ceiling was going to crush me. The floor was going to rise up and strike me. There was something in the closet, and it would jump out at me any

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second. I was going to swell inside my clothes and choke to death—I was going to go blind any day now—I was going to be run over if I went outside, suffocate if I stayed in. My appendix was going to burst some night when I was alone and I would die in agony. I was going to catch some terrible disease. People hated me. I was alone. Nobody loved me. I was wordless, helpless, envious. I was on the outside looking in. I was on the inside looking out. I hated myself.

Gradually the impact of the thing faded, while the horror grew. I glanced at Drip; he was sitting crying into his coffee, but at least he was not trembling. Poor, scared, morbid, dismal Drip, was, in that moment, a tower of strength.

I must have stood there quite a while, pulling out of it. I had to *do* something. I couldn't shrink against Drip! I had my own self-respect to think of. I—

"Wh-what was that you said about . . . outside the door?"

He started, looked up at me, pointed wordlessly at the door. I reached out and opened it.

It was out there, crouched in a corner in the dimness, waiting for someone to come along. I slammed the door and leaned against it, mopping my forehead with my sleeve.

"Is it out there?" whispered Drip.

I nodded. "It's . . . covered with mouths," I gasped. "It's all *wet*."

He got up and peeked out. Then he laughed. "Oh, that's just the little one. He won't hurt you. Wait till you see the others. Gee? Woodie. You're the first one who ever saw them, besides me. Come on; I'll show you more."

To my utter astonishment, I discovered that Drip was pleased. Enormously.

He got up and went out, waiting just outside for me. I realized now why he had always refused to precede me through a door. When he went out he trod on a thing writhing there on the floor and killed it so it would not creep up my legs. I realized that I must have done it for him many times in the past without knowing it.

We came to the top of the stairs. They wound away from under my feet. They looked fragile. They looked dangerous. But it was all right as long as he led the way. He had a certain control over the thousands of creeping, crawling, fluttering things around us. He passed the little landing and something tentacular melted into the wall. Little, slimy things slid out from under his feet and reappeared just behind mine. I pressed very close to him, crushed by the power of hate that oozed from them.

When we reached his room, which was just before mine, he put his hand on the doorknob and turned to me, "We have to burst in," he whispered, "there's a big one that hides there. We can frighten him away if we come suddenly. Otherwise he might not know we were inside. And if he found us in there he would. Eat us?"

Drip turned the knob silently and hurled the door open. A livid mass of blood and blackness that filled the whole room shrank into itself, melting down like ice in a furnace. When it was in midair, and about the size of a plum, it dropped squashily to the floor and rolled under the bed. "You see?" said Drip with conviction. "If we went in quietly, we would shrink down. With it?"

"My God!" I said hoarsely. "Let's get out of here!"

"Oh, it's all right," he said almost

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casually. "As long as we know exactly what time it is, he can't come back until we go." I understood now why Drip had his wall covered with clocks.

I was going to sink down on a chair because I felt a little weak, but I noticed that the seat of the straight-back he had—it was red plush—was quivering. I pointed to it.

"What. Oh, don't mind that?" said Drip. "I think it's stuffed with live spiders. They haven't bitten anyone yet, but soon they will. Burst the seat. And swarm all over the room?"

I looked at him. "This is hor—Drip! What are you grinning about?"

"Grinning. I'm sorry? You see, I never saw anyone frightened before by my things?"

"*Your* things?"

"Certainly. I made them up?"

I have never been so coldly furious. That he should terrify me—*me*—with figments of his phobiacal imagination; make me envy him for knowing the way about his terrifying world; put me in a position of inferiority; it was unthinkable! It was impossible!

"Why did you make them up?" I asked him with frozen intensity.

His answer, of all things in the quivering universe, was the most rational. I have thought of it since. He said:

"I made them up because I was afraid of things. Ever since I could remember? So. I didn't know what it was I was afraid of, and I had to make up something to fear. If I didn't do that, *I would go crazy—*"

I backed away from him, mouthing unprintables, and the lines of the room straightened out as I regained my own point of view. The colors dulled to my old familiar tones, and Drip, that improbable person, that hypothesis, faded out, lingering a moment like a double exposure, and then vanishing. I went upstairs. He was better off nonexistent, I thought, as I dialed for a jam session. He was a subversive influence in this—my universe. He was as horrible a figment of my imagination as was that thing in the hall of his. And just as unbelievable.

I GOT ME Tchaikowsky's B minor concerto because that's the way I felt, and I lay down on the bed. Jive would have driven me morbid, because Drip had been a hep-cat, and I didn't want to think of him somehow.

Footsteps same soft-shoeing up the corridor and stopped outside my door. "Woodie—"

"Oh, damn," I said. "Come in, Judith."

She passed the knob from one hand to the other as she entered, looking at me.

"I must be quite a guy to have such a lovely shadow," I said pointedly.

"Every man in the world seems to be after me," she said, "and I'm dope enough to follow you. I came back to say good-by."

"Where are you going?"

"No place."

"Where am I going?"

"You've already gone."

"I . . . where?"

"Here. From the camp. You forgot to kiss me before you left. You can't get away with that."

"Oh." I got up and kissed her. "Now why did you follow me?"

"I was afraid."

"What; that I'd jump a ship?"

She nodded. "That and . . . I dunno. I was afraid, thassall."

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"I promised you I'd stay ashore, didn't I?"

"You're such an awful liar," she reminded me without malice.

"Heh!" I said. "Always?"

"As long as I've known you—"

"I love you."

"—except when you say that, Woodie, that's one thing I *have* to be sure of."

"I know how it is, insect." I let her go and reached for my hat. "Let's eat."

I REMEMBER that meal. It was the last meal I ate on earth. Chicken cacciatore, minestrone and black coffee in a little Italian kitchen. And over the coffee I explained it to her, the thing that had happened to me.

"So I'm the author of everything," I said. "I made it all up. Sorry I'm not smart, kiddo. I might have done better."

"Yes. Oh, this is ridiculous, Woodie. If I felt like arguing about it, I could ask you this: How could things exist that you didn't even know about? Like my grandmother and the Parthenon and Brazilian tree-porcupines and me before you met me?"

"I dunno," I shrugged, "unless it's because if I make up a universe it has to have a history and functions and a population. Word for word, exactly what did you say to me up at the camp after Monte got . . . hurt?"

"Why, I . . . I don't remember exactly—"

"There it is, then. For all I know I spent quite a while dreaming up your grandmother and the Panthenon and—"

"Woodie, you're impossible!"

"Could be. Could be. I've found a lot of things impossible in the last couple of days. They don't exist any more. Drip, for instance."

"Drip? What happened?"

I told her. She began putting on her hat.

"Wait," I said. "I haven't finished my coffee."

"Do you realize what you're telling me?" she whispered, leaning over the table. "That was murder, Woodie. You murdered that boy!"

"I did nothing of the kind. I did nothing of any kind. Damn it, darling, I know this is a little hard to take. But the universe is my dream, and that's . . . all. Drip couldn't have existed—you told me that yourself when you first met him."

"That was strictly a gag," she said, and stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know." She sounded tired. "Anywhere away from you, Woodie. Let me know when you've got all this out of your head. I've never heard anything so— Oh, well. And, anyway, there's a natural explanation for everything that's happened."

"Sure. I've given you one, and you won't believe it."

She threw up her hands in what I saw was very real disgust. I caught her hand as she turned away. "Judith!" She stood there, not looking at me, not trying to get away, simply not *caring*. "You don't mean this, Judy kid. You can't. You're the only thing I can believe in now."

"When you 'dreamed' me up, Woodie, you let me have too much discernment to stay in love with a . . . a lunatic," she said quietly. She slipped her hand out of mine and went away from there.

I sat still for a long time watching tomato sauce seep into a piece of Italian bread. "When it gets to that pore in the bread," I told myself, "she'll come back." A little later, "When it gets to the crust—" It took quite awhile, and

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she still didn't come back. I tried to laugh it off, but laughing hurt my face. I paid my way out and drifted down the street. I found me a gin mill and I got good—and—plastered.

Listen, winged things. Listen, things that delight in liveness and greenness. I am sorry I created you, I am sorry I dreamed of you, watched you grow, watched you die and die and live again to see your ultimate death. You were made of my laughter and of the warmth in my heart. You were made of the light of the sun I made. You and shy creatures, and strong and beautiful things and people, and music, and richness, and magic, and the beat of hearts; you are gone because I was awakened. Forgive me, my glorious phantasms!

I KNEW what to start on. It's called Habañera Seco and they brew it in Guatemala and it's smooth like Scotch and strong like vodka and worse all around than absinthe. If you can't stand to mix 'em—and who can?—you can't drink Habañera—

One drink and I felt better. Two, much better. Three, I was back where I started from. Four, I started getting dismal. Seven, I was definitely morbid. Great stuff. Far as I was concerned, the woes of the world were in a bottomless bottle, and it was my duty and desire to empty the bottle and buy another. Judith was gone, and without Judith there was no sun any more, and nothing for it to shine on. Everything was over, I said dramatically to myself; and, by God, I'd see that a good job was done of it. I staggered out and leaned against the door post, looking up the street.

"Wake up, Woodie," I quavered, "it's all over now. It's all done. There's nothing left any more, anywhere, anywhere. A life is an improbable louse on a sterile sphere. A man is a monster and a woman is a wraith! I am not a man but a consciousness asleep, and now I wake! Now I wake!" I pushed away from the door post and began screaming, "Wake! Wake!"

Just how it happened I can't say. But things slipped and slid out of existence. There was no violence, and nothing fell. Everything went out of focus and left me alone in an element that was deep and thick and the essence of loneliness. What struck coldly into me was something I saw just before I—went. It was Judith; Judith running down the street toward me with her [illegible] out, and a smile making it tough for the tears to run off her cheeks. She had come back after all, but the thing couldn't be stopped now. My dream was gone!

I and that thick element expanded soundlessly to the limits of my dream, the universe, and where we passed, mighty suns and nebulæ joined the nothingness of us. I rode again in a place where there is no time, where I had been before I dreamed up a universe. I thought about it then, how birds and rocks and wars and loveliness and choking exultance had been figments of my proud imagination.

And only then I faced the ultimate question. Listen to me now, and never dare to face it.

"If all things in a universe were but peopling a dream, and if they could not exist when their existence was doubted," I thought, "then is it possible that I myself am a mere figment of my own imagi—"

THE END.

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FICTION

by ALAN GRANT

I have met my fate in an icy hate
  And drunk a toast to death;
And I've seen quite well of the gates of hell,
  And felt the devil's breath;

I have seen the sign in a glass of wine,
  And heard the call to love;
I have rid the land of a despot's hand,
  And climbed the skies above.

I have known as much of a fairy's touch
  And the spell that called her there
As I have of gods and the magic swords
  Of death and life they bear.

I have known the stars and the mystic Mars
  As well as local lanes;
I have known the sport of King Arthur's Court
  And tasted jungle rains:

For I listen long to the siren song
  That leads I know not where;
And I sail a sea where my soul is free—
  And never leave my chair.

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THE CROSSROADS

by L. RON HUBBARD

The farmer found a crossroads where it paid to be a trader. Very queer crossroads—a crossroads in time!

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

It was not like Eben Morse to resign himself to the fates and vagaries of an economic muddle he could not fathom, not even to the A.A.A. or the H.O.L.C. or the F.L.C. or the other various unsyllabic combinations which he regu-

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larly, each morning, collected in his R.F.D. box.

"It ain't right," he said that dawn to Marie, his wife, and Lucy, his horse. "I can grow crops and I know crops and there ain't nobody in Jefferson County thet can grow more corn per acre, and what's more better corn per stock than me. And when it comes to turnips and squash and leaf lettuce I reckon I ain't so far behind. And, by cracky, there must be some place where the stuff can be sold so folks can eat."

"The guvvermunt paid you right smart for all that plowing under you did, Eben," cautioned his wife.

"Well, I reckon I don't give a spit how smart they paid me because it all went out in taxes so they could pay me ag'in. No sir, Maria"—and here he had to pause and grunt while he made Lucy take the bit—"it ain't right. Them city papers, when they ain't a-talking about some furriner fightin' some other furriner, is saying how people is starving in the streets. Well, I can't figure it out. Here I'm the best corn raiser in Jefferson County and I got lots of corn and squash and turnips and leaf lettuce, too, and still the government says I got to stop raisin' what I planted and plow under what I was goin' to plant. It's like that government man said yesterday when I asked him what the dingdong it was all about, the eeconomic problems is acute. And, by golly, our eeconomic problems is going to get even more acute if we don't get some hams and things for this winter. Like my grandfather Boswell that traded a spavined mare for the purtiest prize bull in Ohio used to say, 'Politics is a subjeck for men that's got full bellies—otherwise it ain't politics, it's war.' We ain't no paupers that we got to be supported by no charity and if they's folks starvin' in the city, why, I reckon they got somethin' or other to trade for turnips and truck."

"Now, Eben," said Maria, anxiously wiping her hands on her apron, "don't you go doin' nothin' to get the guvvermunt mad with you. Maybe this thing you're goin' to do ain't got any place in this here eeconomic system acuteness."

"Never did hear anythin' wrong with a man fillin' his belly so long as he didn't have to steal to do it," said Eben, picking up the lines and trailing them to the box seat of the spring wagon.

"Mebbe them city folks'll trade you right outn everything and you'll have to walk home," protested Maria, as she worriedly swept an unruly strand of gray hair from her tired eyes.

"Listen at the woman!" said the offended Eben to Lucy, the mare. "Maria, I reckon as how you're forgettin' that time I swapped a belt buckle for one of them new-fangled double-action, hand-lever, self-draining washing machines for you. Giddap, Lucy."

The heavily sagging wagon finally decided to follow along on the hoofs of Lucy, and while Maria held open the gate, creaked out into the ruts of the dirt road. Eben's hunting setter came leaping excitedly after, having been awakened in the nick of time by the noisy wheels.

"Git for home, Boozer!" said Eben.

Mystified, the dog stopped, took a few hesitant steps after the wagon and then, seeing Eben shake his whip as a warning, halted, one foot raised, eyes miserable, tail drooping to stand there staring after, while the spring wagon's yellow dust got farther and farther away, smaller and smaller until it vanished over a slight roll in the limitless prairie.

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EBEN LOOKED like a simile for determination. His lean, wind-burned, plow-hardened, tobacco-stained, overalled, shrewd-eyed self might have served as a model for a modern painter in the need of a typical New Englander type peculiar to the Middle West. But Eben was not quite as sure as he appeared. What Maria had said about the city folks had shaken him. Dagnab women, anyhow! Always makin' a man feel uncertain of hisself! Wasn't he Vermont stock? Hadn't his folks, in Vermont, England, China and Iowa to say nothing to the Fiji Isles and Ohio, bargained and businessed everybody in sight out of their shirts? Yankee traders, or the direct descendants of them, were just plain impossible to trim unless it was by each other. Still— He'd never been away from this expanse of green-and-yellow prairie and, no matter his own folks, he wasn't sure. Things had changed out in the world. Mebbe them stores in the city wasn't as easy to deal with as Jeb Hawkins' down at Corn Center. He looked with misgivings at his wagon load, then under the tarp were turnips and lettuce and corn and some early apples were making the canvas cover bulge. They were tangibles. With his own hands he had brought them into strength in this world and, by golly, there weren't turnips or lettuce or corn like that anywhere else in Jefferson County.

Plow them under?

If folks was starving, then, by golly, they needed food. That was simple. And if they had anything at all, Eben knew he could bring whatever it was back and trade it to Louie Bach, or Jim Johnson or George Thompson. They had all the lettuce and apples and corn and turnips they needed and they had hams and a lot of other truck Eben needed. And Jeb Hawkins' store would trade him whatever else— Surely it was a simple transaction.

He began to maunder on what things he might get for his produce and how he would convert them and how he would go about trading for them or something else—and so passed the hours of the morning.

Because he lived down at the south end of Jefferson County and had always traveled north to Corn Center, he was not sure of his road nor, indeed, sure of his destination. People spoke of the city and pointed south and that was little enough to go upon. Twice he paused and asked directions, getting vague replies, and drove on until noon. Lucy nuzzled her feed bag and Eben ate the lunch Maria had prepared and then sat for half an hour under a tree beside a brook wondering indistinctly on his project.

Through the better portion of the afternoon he continued on southward. The country became more level and less inhabited and he began to be homesick. His eyes did not like looking for ten miles to a flat horizon without so much as a poplar, a ditch or a rolling hill to ease the sameness. He was even less sure of himself than he had been at noon. He'd spend the night beside the road, a fact which did not worry him, and he couldn't starve with a load of vegetables. But if this city was many days away, why Lucy would run plumb out of grain, and he didn't like to think of how she'd begin to look at him if she had to eat nothing but dusty grass.

DUSK CAME and then darkness and Eben, disliking to stop because he might yet see the city in the distance, continued onward, wrapping a sheepskin around his feet to keep them warm.

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When the stars said it was about eight and when Eben was about to give up for the night, he came to a cross-roads.

"Whoa," he said to Lucy. And then looked about him.

Here four roads made an intersection and so irregular was their departure from this spot and so widely different was their quality, that Eben was very perplexed. One road was concrete, or at least white and hard like that one the W.P.A. had put down through Corn Center. The road to the right of that, going away from Eben, was full of large green-gray boulders and seemed nearly impassable to anything except foot traffic. The next was hard and shiny and metallic and threw back the stars so that, at first, Eben thought it was wet. Then, of course, there was his own, a double rut worn into twin prisons for narrow wheels and baked there by the September sun.

Eben got down and felt of each one, appreciative of the quality of the shiny metal one, except that a horse would probably fall down on it the first rain. The white, hard one wasn't quite like that road in Corn Center because it was dusty, besides it showed the tracks of horses but no wheels and that one in Corn Center showed nothing. Although he had been certain that the country was all flat, the boulder-strewn way came down a hill to this place and, crossing it, ran up a hill and vanished.

Then an oddity struck Eben. For the past few minutes that he had been on this intersection the sun had been at high noon! He put his thumb in his eye and peered at it accusingly and then, because it was quite definitely the sun and obviously there, he shook his head and muttered:

"Never can tell what the goldurned government is going to do next!"

Lucy was eying him forlornly and he forgot about the sun to remember that she was probably hungry and that he was nearly starved himself. He hung the feed bag on her nose and, making her move the wagon so that it was not on any of the right of ways, took out the remains of the lunch Maria had fixed and munched philosophically with the warm sun on his back. He felt drowsy after that and, stretching out, slept.

He did not know how long he had been lying there, for when he awoke the sun was still at high noon.

"Wilt the whole lot!" he grumbled, spreading the canvas more tightly and thoroughly over his load. He hunted around until he found a spring among the boulders and, after watering Lucy, sluiced the canvas.

Methodically, then, he took up the problem of the roads. One of these must lead to the city, but with four from which to choose he rapidly became groggy with indecision. He sat down in the wagon's shadow and waited for somebody to come along with information.

THE HOURS drifted by, though the sun did not move, and Eben was nearly upon the point of continuing along his own dirt track when he saw something moving along the rocks up the hill. He got up and hailed and the something moved cautiously down toward him, from boulder to boulder.

The newcomer was a bearded old fellow in a greasy brown robe, which was his only covering. Bits of tallow and sod clung in his gray whiskers and a hunted look lurked in his watery eyes.

"Long live the Messiah!" said the old man.

"What Messiah?" said Eben, offended

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at the vigor if the old man meant what he thought he meant.

"Long live Byles, the Messiah!" said the old man.

"Never heard of him," said Eben.

The old man stared in amazement and then slowly began to examine Eben from toe to straw hat, shaking his head doubtfully.

"You aren't like anyone I ever saw before," said the old man. "From whence dost thou come?"

"Jefferson County," said Eben.

"It must be far, far away," said the old man. "I have never heard of it. Are you telling the truth when you say you have never heard of Byles, the Messiah?"

"Yep," said Eben. "And what's more I don't reckon I care whether I hear about him or not. I want to know which road I take to get to the city."

The old man looked around. "I have never been along any of these roads. In fact, I don't remember this crossroad at all no matter how many times I have come down this hill. And as for a city, why I know only of Gloryville and Halleluyah, one behind me and one before me on this road I travel."

"I never heard of either of them," said Eben. "But I got to find out which one goes to the city, because I've got a load of vegetables here that I aim to trade to the city folks."

"Vegetables! At this season of the year?"

"Why not? It's September, ain't it?"

"September! Why thou must be mad. This is January!"

Eben shrugged. "That ain't finding the way to the city."

"Wait," said the old man. "See here. You say you have vegetables. Let me see them."

Eben lifted the edge of the canvas and the old man began to gloat and his jaws to slaver. He picked up a turnip and marveled over it. He caressed a leaf of lettuce. He stroked the rosy skin of an apple. And when he picked up a beautiful ear of corn he cooed.

Eben was a trader. His eye became shrewd and his pose indolent. "I reckon the wagon's pretty heavy, anyway. If maybe you got something or other to trade, I might let you have somethin'. Course vegetables—in January—is pretty scarce and the city folks will be willin' to pay a right smart amount. But maybe now you got somethin' valuable that might persuade me to trade. I ain't a-sayin' I will, but I ain't a-sayin' I won't."

"Wait here!" cried the old man and bounded up the hill as though mounted on springs.

EBEN WAITED for an hour with patience, pondering what article the old man might produce for trade. It was certain he couldn't have much for he seemed very thin and poor.

There was a tinkling of donkey bells and, in a moment, half a dozen men leading beasts of burden came into sight and down the hill. Eben had misgivings. He was sure he had not any use whatever for six donkeys. But the donkeys were not the articles of trade. The men brought the animals to a halt and unloaded from them, with ceremony, two big jugs a beast.

"Now!" said the old man. "These for your wagon load of vegetables."

Eben looked dubious. He plucked a shoot of grass and chewed it. "Can't say as I'm much enthused."

"Not . . . not enthused! Why, by the saint! My good fellow, these jars be full of the famous Glory Monastery Brandy!"

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"Reckon I ain't got no license to sell liquor," said Eben.

"But it's all we have!" cried the old man. "And we are starved for good food! The peasants have to spend so much time praying during the summer that they hardly get a chance to plant and so we have to make them fast all winter. Only this brandy, made from grapes grown on our slopes, is in abundance." He stepped nearer Eben, whispering. "It's Byles' favorite brandy and that's why we make so much of it."

"Nope," said Eben.

"But just taste it!" cried the old man.

"Don't drink," said Eben. "I reckon I better be getting on to the city."

"Please don't leave!" begged the old man. "Carlos! Run back and bring up *twelve* donkey loads of brandy."

Carlos and the others hurried away and Eben philosophically chewed his shoot of grass until they came back and the additional twenty-four jars were unloaded.

"Now," begged the old man. "Will you trade?"

It came to Eben that many of his vegetables might possibly spoil if he kept them until he reached the city, and, of course, he might be able to do something about the brandy.

"Well—" said Eben. "I might give you a few things. This brandy is pretty cheap in the city."

"How much will you give us?"

"Well . . . mebbe a quarter of the load. After all, you only got thirty-six jars here and they hold maybe not more than five gallons apiece and"—he scratched with his toe in the dirt—"that's only about a hundred and eighty gallons of brandy. Yep, I can let you have a quarter of the load—providing you let me do the selecting."

They agreed and presently the mules were laden with turnips and corn and leaf lettuce and apples and the wagon was lighter by a quarter.

Eben watched them pick their way among the rocks, up the hill and out of sight until their voices, badly mixed in a dolorous hymn about one Byles, faded to nothing.

He then began to lift the brandy off the road and into the wagon. But he very soon found, to the tune of a snapping spring, that he had made far too good a trade. Not only was he unable to transport this stuff, but unless he lightened his vegetable load he could not go on with this injured wagon. Scowling he started to walk up the hill to see if he could find a sapling with which to mend his wagon. But he did not get far from the wagon before the thump of marching feet brought him hurrying back.

Sixteen soldiers, with an officer, were coming along the dusty white road. They formed two files between which marched five men whose heads were bowed and whose hands were tied. Eben was not familiar with the dull-gray of their uniforms, but he suspected that maybe the government had changed the color since he'd last seen army men. Soldiers, officer and prisoners paid him no attention but marched on along the white road and around the edge of a chalky cliff and out of sight. Shortly after there was a blast of firing followed by four more blasts and the soldiers, with their officer, came marching back.

Business concluded, the officer saw Eben. At the leader's signal the column of men stopped and their dust behind them settled. The officer stared at Eben, then at the wagon, then at Lucy and back to the wagon. Finally his eye lingered upon the jars.

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"Who are you and what are you doing here?" demanded the officer.

"I'm Eben Morse and I reckon the government would be plumb put out if anything was to happen to me."

"Put out?" and the officer laughed loudly. "My man, I suppose you do not realize that a Totalitarian state is far too powerful to be overthrown. You have seen what happens to the enemies of the Greater Dictatorship. What do you have there?"

"Brandy," said Eben.

"What?"

"Brandy and vegetables."

"And what, may I ask, is brandy?"

"You drink it," said Eben.

"Hm-m-m," said the officer. "I must inspect this."

Eben got a water bucket out of his wagon and poured a couple gallons of brandy in it. He handed the bucket to the officer who drank thirstily.

It surprised Eben that the fellow did not choke or gasp and then he realized that this brandy must be of a very smooth quality indeed. The officer handed the bucket on to his men. It was soon empty.

"Fill it up," said the officer.

About half an hour later the officer and the soldiers were sitting in a semicircle around the tail of the wagon, telling one another they were all the best of friends.

"Fill it up wunsh more," said the officer.

Eben filled up the bucket, but he did not present it. "Who," he said, "is going to pay for this? Brandy is very expensive."

"Charge it to the State," said the officer. Then he thought better of it and reached into his pocket, bringing out a roll of paper. He tendered a bill.

"That'sh plenty to pay for it. Now give me the bucket."

Eben shook his head. "This must be Confederate money like my grandfather Boswell used to talk about. It won't pay for the brandy."

"Sergeant!" bawled the officer. "Arrest thish man for treashon!"

But when the sergeant got up, he promptly fell flat on his ugly face and when the soldiers got up they fell down.

"Maybe you could take something elsh for payment," said the officer.

Eben had been wishing for some time that he was not there all alone at the mercies of these soldiers. And now he looked at them shrewdly. "Well, I reckon maybe I might take a few rifles."

"What?"

"Well," said Eben, "this brandy is pretty expensive. And if you don't pay me for it and leave me alone, why I don't guess I'll be able to get any more of it for you. Maybe I can trade some of these rifles to Jeb Hawkins for rabbit hunting."

"Can't do it," said the officer.

"No more brandy," said Eben.

THREE HOURS later the last soldier had wobbled away and sixteen rifles, sixteen bullet bandoleers, one automatic and five clips lay under the canvas along with the vegetables. Once more Eben searched for a sapling to mend his broken spring for he was certain now that he would not abandon so much as a drop of the remaining hundred and seventy gallons of brandy.

When he got to the top of the boulder-strewn hill, it became dark and he could not find any trees. As soon as he walked around the cliff on the white road and found the graves there, he abandoned that section. He was just about to explore the metal road when

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something was seen to be moving along it. Eben went back to his wagon and waited.

It was the strangest kind of a vehicle he had ever seen for it had no wheels. It was just a big, gleaming box which scudded along the surface without a sound. There was something frightening about it.

When it came abreast of the wagon it stopped and a section of it clanked outward. A thing which was possibly a man, leaned out, staring at Eben. Its head was nearly as big as its body, and it had two antennae waving above its brow as well as its huge, pupilless eyes.

"Musta escaped from some carnival," muttered Eben to himself.

"BHLLNGLBHBHNANGONRONRHUBNR?" said the driver.

"Reckon you must be some furriner," said Eben. "I don't understand you."

"OHDHBGBHLBN ABLA OAHBHBGRHUNHLBLAGABAA?" said the driver.

"Can't you talk English?" said Eben curiously.

The driver got out. His spindly legs did not lift him to a height in excess of Eben's shirt pocket. He began to rummage around inside the cab of the wheelless vehicle and finally produced some tubes and coils which he assembled rapidly into some sort of instrument. This he plugged into a hole in the side of the vehicle and then aimed a sort of megaphone at Eben.

"ABAB LALLG NNABH ABOD!" said the driver.

"That's a funny-looking outfit you got there," said Eben. "But, shucks, I seen a lot of radios that was better. The thing don't even play."

The driver twiddled the dials while Eben spoke and then, much mystified, left off. "BHRLBGDLRLH!"

"Don't do no good," said Eben. "I can't understand a word of it."

On that the driver beamed. He tuned one dial sharply. "Then you speak elementary English," said the phone.

"Of course I do. And if you do, too, why didn't you do so in the first place?"

"I think you will not be insulted if I do. But usually you know it is considered vulgar to talk plain English. Tell me, can't you really encipher?"

"Don't reckon I ever caught myself doing it," said Eben, amused.

The driver walked around Eben, examining him. "In our language schools, you know," said the phone, "we are considered encipher and decipher as we speak. It is grammatically correct. But you seem to be from some very distant land where plain English is still spoken. It must be a very dull place."

"I reckon we get along," said Eben. "What you got in that thing, there?"

"The truck? Oh, some junk. I was taking it down to the city dump. What have you got in that thing?"

"Well," said Eben, "I got some brandy and I got some vegetables, but they're both pretty valuable."

"Brandy? Vegetables? I don't know those two words."

EBEN CHUCKLED to himself. And this feller was accusing *him* of being ignorant. "Well, I'll show you."

He gave the fellow an apple and the driver immediately pulled a small lens of a peculiar color from his pocket and looked it all over.

"It's to eat," said Eben.

"Eat?" blinked the driver, antennae waving in alarm.

"Sure," said Eben.

More anxiously than before the driver remade his examination. "Well, there's

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no poison in it," he said doubtfully. And then he bit it with his puny teeth and presently smiled. "Why, that is very good indeed! AA B RGHBO—"

"Now don't start that again," said Eben.

"It's excellent," said the driver. "Do you have many of these?"

"They're pretty rare," said Eben.

"What is that in the jars?"

Eben gave him a drink of the brandy and again the driver beamed.

"How this warms one! It's marvelous! Could I buy some from you?" And he took out a card which had holes punched in it.

"What's this?" said Eben.

"That's a labor card, of course. It shows my value. Of course as the driver of a waste wagon I don't earn very much, only forty labor units a week, but it should be sufficient—"

"What kind of junk have you got in that wagon?"

"What does that have to do with my buying some of this?" said the driver.

"Mebbe we can cook up a trade," said Eben.

"Trade? What is trade?"

"Well, you got something I might want and I got something you want and so we swap. I give you what I got and you give me what you got and there you are."

"How quaint! Never heard of such a thing. But I haven't anything in my truck that you could want."

"Never can tell," said Eben.

The driver lifted up the top of the box vehicle and Eben, peering in, very nearly fell in!

The whole load was gold bracelets and necklaces and diamond and ruby rings!

Eben could not trust his speech for a little while and then, casually, "That looks like gold." He tossed a bracelet indolently in his horny hand, feeling its weight.

"Yes, of course," said the driver.

"Real gold."

"Certainly," said the driver.

"Reckon," said Eben, eying the other with shrewdness, "you figure this ain't much account."

"Well, since transmutation factories lowered the price on gold to three units a ton, nobody wants to wear it. The Street Department had to clean up the back of the Woman's Distribution Center and so I am taking it down to the city dump, of course. It is much easier to make sand into gold than to remelt the gold."

"Then I reckon this load is worth, at three a ton, mebbe six-seven dollars. Tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a basket of apples and a jar of brandy for the lot."

The driver looked at Eben in astonishment and then, before the man could change his mind, leaped into the truck and backed it swiftly to eject the load of jewelry beside the spring wagon. Sweatingly he then lifted the five-gallon jar of brandy and the basket of apples into his cab and went scudding back from whence he had come without another word.

EBEN FELT uncomfortable. Very seldom did his conscience bother him about a trade, but now— He picked up pieces of jewelry at random and bit them, leaving clear teeth dents in them. It most certainly was gold!

Immediately upon that he became even more uncomfortable. Supposing somebody came along and stole it! Hurriedly he began to carry it behind a bush

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and bury it and as he worked another alarming thought came to him. People would think he'd stolen it! He should have gotten a bill of sale! And as he did not have one he would never dare let on that he had this stuff. Forlornly he finished hiding it. Why they'd send him to jail for years and years! They'd say he'd gone and robbed somebody! And then came the final blow! The government said it was against the law to have gold! He'd broken the law! And they'd put him away for years and years!

"Hullo!"

He leaped about to find that his preoccupation had let four men in uniform come up the chalky road unnoticed. They had a very severe appearance, but still there was a furtiveness about them which belied instant aggressiveness.

"A little while ago," said the spokesman, a young man, "a friend of ours came along here and got something from you."

"Wasn't my fault," said Eben.

"No, no, you don't understand. He and his soldiers came back singing and walking in circles and muttering about a wonderful drink and . . . well . . . we became curious, naturally, as to what made them so happy."

Eben looked them over. "Well . . . I guess it won't do no harm. It was brandy. There's some of it in the water bucket."

The spokesman drank and smacked his lips. He passed the bucket to his companions and they drank ecstatically, handing the empty bucket back for replenishment.

"Nope," said Eben.

"Sir, we are officers in the Hurricane Guard of the Dictator himself!"

"That don't make no difference," said Eben. "If you want brandy, you got to trade me something for it."

They studied him for a while and then went into conference among themselves. Then they again consulted Eben.

"We will buy your brandy," said the eager young spokesman. "How much do you want for it?" And he offered the assembled capital of the four.

"Money's no good," said Eben. "It's got to be a swap."

They again went into a huddle and then the spokesman said, "We haven't anything to swap you, except guns. There aren't anything but guns in our whole country, because when we conquered everybody there was nobody left to produce anything except guns."

"Well—" said Eben doubtfully, "guns ain't worth much."

"But you'll take them?"

"Well—"

The four officers were gone in a flurry of chalk dust.

EBEN SAT DOWN on a boulder beside his wagon and watched Lucy crop grass now that she was released from harness. The gold worried him and these officers worried him for he could not quite understand why they really would trade. If they had guns, it seemed more likely that they use them to take what they wanted. Perhaps, though, they didn't want to disclose the source of the brandy or cut off its supply. Still, if they found this gold, they wouldn't bargain about that. They'd just take it without so much as giving him a blessing. Eben went over to see how the gold was getting along and was engaged in covering up some of it that could be seen to glitter. It grieved him that he had to abandon it, it was so pretty. The most

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he could take would be some necklaces and bracelets for Maria.

While so engaged, he was again accosted and at the sound of the hail he turned to find the soldiers coming back. Hastily he got away from the gold and then, seeing what was arriving, momentarily forgot about it.

He had said guns and now, it seemed, he was getting guns! In a long procession he saw soldiers dragging at wheeled machine guns and ammunition carts and light antitank rifles and their caissons. Soldiers, soldiers, soldiers and guns, guns, guns. And each soldier had a furtive look about him.

The young officer, who had made the bargain, was evidently a business man beneath his rank stripes. "Sir," he said, "we are bringing you guns. All these guns for all that brandy. We offer the trade and if you refuse it, we offer the guns another way."

Eben stared at the arsenal which was mounting up beside his wagon, towering and then towering again until the pyramid was spilling arms into the road. He wanted to say "No," but the sign of this force got the better of his judgment. He made no protest when the brandy was carted away, all hundred and seventy gallons of it. The memory of the five dead prisoners was strong upon him. And so the brandy and the soldiers were soon vanished, leaving Eben with enough materials for a good-sized war. He tried to be hopeful. But he was certain, the longer he sat looking at that pile of weapons, that he had been bested. What good were machine guns against rabbits? And there were only rabbits in Jefferson County. Why, all he knew about the things was what young Tom Stebbins had said when he came back from the Marines.

Dolorously he took one of the long barrels and mounted it upon its tripod. And then, being a Yankee, his mechanical spirit was stirred by the mystery of it. The thing was so complicated that it challenged his ingenuity. He finally found how to pull back the loading handle and then, going from there, figured out the way to put a belt through the loading slot. The result far exceeded his expectations. With a chattering roar bullets flung out from the weapon and carved a long trench in the hill. He let go of the trigger and blinked at the thing. Little by little he pieced together the way it worked, and so engrossed did become that he was startled when the old man from the Glory Monastery put a hand on his shoulder.

"Wh— Oh, hello," said Eben.

THE OLD MAN was staring in fascination at the machine gun. "What manner of instrument is that?"

"It's a machine gun," said Eben.

The old man looked at the mighty pile of them. "But you have so many!"

"Enough to start a war," said Eben.

"War?"

"Well, that's what they use these for," said Eben. And wishing to show off his newly acquired skill he sent a ferocious burst into the hill. Rocks and dust flew violently.

"Do . . . do they all act like that?" said the old man.

"Yep," said Eben. And he showed him how to load and fire it. The old man got up from the tripod shaking, but evidently not from fear.

"You wait here," said the old man and then, with beard and cassock flowing behind, streamed up the hill and out of sight. He was gone for nearly two hours and Eben began to think that he had been scared away and was just be-

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ginning to swear at himself for not having traded off some more vegetables when the old man came streaming back, followed closely by several monks.

"Now do that again," said the old man.

"What?"

"Shoot that thing."

Eben loaded and fired it and the newcomers *tch-tched* as they watched the dirt fly out of the hill.

"Are they all alike?" said the old man.

"Well, some of them are bigger," said Eben.

"Let's see how they work," said the old man.

Eben wheeled out an antitank rifle and, after thinking it over for a few minutes, got it loaded and fired. The shell blew a great gouge from the hill and lifted a boulder ten feet in the air.

"You see?" said the old man to his friends.

"We see," they said grimly.

"And?" said the old man.

"You are right," said his friends.

"Bring the donkeys," said the old man.

At a signal, nearly a hundred donkeys came tinkling over the hill, each one loaded with two five-gallon jugs of brandy.

"Wait a minute," said Eben. "You want to trade that for these guns?"

"Certainly," said the old man. "We're sick of shouting 'Long Live Byles' from morning until night. Besides we don't think he's the Messiah. We're almost certain that I am."

"Well," said Eben, chewing thoughtfully on a shoot of grass, "these here machine guns and cannons come pretty high. Now you got just about enough there to buy three of them."

"Thr-three?" said the old man.

"The ammunition, of course," said Eben, "is extra."

The old man looked at the guns and then at the long line of donkeys. He sighed and then, glancing at the gouged hill, brightened. "All right. Men, unload and go back for more."

Some four hours later there were no more guns anywhere in sight. But nearly a half acre of ground was covered by stone jars. Eben walked thoughtfully between the wide rows, lifting a cover here and there and smelling the stuff.

It was better, far better, to have brandy, though he did not know exactly why. It was something tangible and, unlike guns or gold, was not likely to get him into trouble. Of course he would have to figure out a way to transport all this and a way to sell it—

WITH A SWOOSH, the rectangular box slid to a halt beside the spring wagon. Lucy looked inquiringly at it and then went on champing her grass.

"RBABLNHB!" said the driver.

"Hello," said Eben, walking over and putting his elbow on the window.

"I came back about those apples," said the driver.

"Yep?" said Eben.

"I brought another truck load of gold for a basket of them."

Eben swiftly shook his head. "Nope."

"You mean you won't trade like you did?"

"Nope."

"Say, you can't do that! Why—Why I sold those apples for a labor unit apiece and I've got buyers until I can't count them. You can't refuse!"

"Nope," said Eben. "No trade."

The driver pushed out of the truck.

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"Not even one basket? Not just one? This is much better gold. I got it off the dump north of town. It's in bars!"

"Nope," said Eben.

The driver pointed to the brandy. "You don't have to give me one of those. That made everybody sick. So you are getting a better bargain than ever. Only half of what you gave me before! And twice as much weight in gold!"

"Nope," said Eben.

The antennae waved in disgust and the driver leaped into the other end of his wheelless truck and swooshed away from there, without even saying good-by.

Eben sighed deeply: It pained him to have to refuse such a trade. But if the government said that having gold was agin' the law, then it was agin' the law. He'd already put his neck in the noose for having a couple tons of it—

There was a steady tramp nearby and Eben whirled to see that the white road was thick with soldiers and guns! They were marching without regard to order and each one was eagerly towing some sort of weapon and some had, among them, a big piece of artillery and its caissons. The air was thick with the dust of their coming and the road about Eben was thick with clamoring men.

"We want some of that stuff," said a junior officer, thrusting a machine gun at Eben. He had evidently already had a drink from his luckier mates, just enough to stimulate his desire for more.

"Nope," said Eben. "That brandy—"

"We offer a trade and if we don't get what we came for," growled the officer, "then we'll take it, anyway! We are the regimental guard of Lomano the Lurid himself and what we do we do and what we want we want. Now is it a trade?"

Eben sat down dejectedly and watched his brandy vanish jar by jar up the long chalk road. And some time later he dolorously inspected a park of miscellaneous weapons and ammunition. Business was not so good, he decided, for it was not likely that there could be much more brandy at the Glory Monastery. Well—he still had his vegetables. And ten baskets of apples. Maybe he'd better get out of here while he possessed that much negotiable capital.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

Truck after wheelless truck came to a stop on the metal road and driver after driver, big-headed and spindle-legged, jumped out to surround Eben.

"Now," said the driver who had already been there. "Do we trade or don't we trade? This is my union and in each one of these trucks is a full load of gold."

"I reckon I have to be sorry," said Eben, "but—"

There was a whir and a crackle as of a leaping arc and the world grew dim for Eben. He caught at his wagon and slumped down, wholly unconscious.

It was, of course, still high noon when he woke up. The trucks were gone. The vegetables and apples were gone.

Eben sighed, staring into the empty spring wagon. He was thankful to at least show no mark of what they had done to him, save for a slight headache. The robbers!

And then he turned and saw that in some twenty places, at the rate of two tons or more a place, the trucks had dumped their contents. Gold! Gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold! And more gold!

"Oh—" groaned Eben. There must be forty or fifty tons of it!

Gold, gold, gold, gold—

"Hello!"

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EBEN nodded wearily to the old man. And then, noticing that he was powder-stained and high with excitement, took interest.

"More guns," said the old man. "He's got the United Order of Fanatics against us! We've got to have more guns and more ammunition!"

Eben waved a tired hand toward the wide park of guns.

"Ah!" cried the old man ecstatically. "And as for the trade, our credit will have to be good. We have brandy but no time to transport it."

"Brandy in hand," said Eben, reviving, "or no guns!"

There was a chattering roar up on the hill and Eben ducked from the swarm of singing slugs which barely missed his head.

"Is our credit good?" demanded the old man.

"Sure!" said Eben.

And then the park was emptied by half a hundred toiling, battle-stained monks and Eben's capital went rolling over the boulders and out of sight up the hill.

He sank down upon a boulder. His capital was gone save for this accursed gold. And if the government found all this gold around him they'd put him away for years if not as a thief then at least as a horder. Life became bitter to Eben. He was hungry. Lucy was out of grain. His wagon was empty. And he had nothing negotiable unless it was gold, a commodity which would surely get him into a great deal of trouble.

It could not be worse. He had better abandon the wagon and ride Lucy back home.

He had made this decision and was in the act of whistling for Lucy when he saw a knot of men come hurrying down the chalk road toward him. They stopped, threw themselves down and fired with their rifles at something Eben could not see. Then they leaped up and sped swiftly toward him.

A gray-headed, corpse-faced giant was in the lead. His muchly-braided uniform was torn and his hat was gone and his sword scabbard was empty. He almost rushed by Eben and then came to an abrupt halt, glaring. The few soldiers with him clustered about.

"Is this the devil?" said the giant.

"Probably," said a soldier.

"Did you or did you not sell brandy to my bodyguard in return for their guns?" snarled the giant.

"Well—" said Eben.

"So it is true! It is true that I, Lomano the Lurid, am revolted against because of you, you miserable lout! Colcha! Shoot this man!"

"Your dictatorship, there isn't much time. The people are hard on our heels!"

"Shoot him! He has cost me my realms!" roared Lomano.

But just as Colcha raised his rifle there was a burst of firing from down the chalk road and the soldiers dropped down and fired swiftly back, driving their pursuers to cover. Then, once more Colcha started to do his duty.

"You, the trader!" hailed a voice. And Eben was almost happy to see the old man and an armed bodyguard come rushing down the hill.

"What's this?" said Lomano.

Then the chalk road's distance belched more bullets and Lomano and his troops decided they had tarried too long. Not knowing the intentions of the old man and his group, they dashed off and around the cliff and out of sight. A moment later a stream of indifferently

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armed peasants loped up the chalk road and rounded the chalk cliff in pursuit of Lomano.

Eben sighed with relief and was ready to express his thanks to the old man when that worthy came up, panting and glaring.

"You, the trader!" said the old man. "Have you any more guns?"

"No," said Eben swiftly, "but if you pay me what you owe me I can possibly get you as many more as you want."

"Hah! I thought so. What use have I for guns now that I have won! And you would sell them to another who would oppose me. Sir, you find before you the Messiah! And who threatens my existence must be disposed of here and now!"

"Hey!" said Eben. "You owe me money. You took my guns and you owe me—"

"Sir, if you have any last prayers, say them."

"Wait a minute," begged Eben. "You can't do this. If you say you don't want me to sell guns then just pay me what you owe me and I'll be on my way and never come back—"

"Sir, this cannot be. I, the Messiah after Byles—God rest his soul—command that this menace to my rule be removed!"

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

THREE wheelless cars, not dissimilar to the trucks save that they had windows instead of blank sides, rushed up to a halt on the metal road. Out of them poured a swarm of big-eyed men with antennae.

The new Messiah gaped at the weird beings and his men, in alarm, fell back. The beings swarmed around Eben and the Messiah took to his heels with his crew.

"AB ABABABH ABLNHB?" said an officer to the driver Eben had first seen.

"ABHBLRH," said the driver, quivering.

The officer fished into his metal shirt and pulled out a sheet with dots on it. He looked at Eben and then at the paper.

"I understand that you speak vulgar English. Therefore I shall decipher this order as I go. Attend! 'Whereas the strange being at the Crossroads delivered into the hands of one HRBBHB various articles to be known as BBHHOB and OHLLB and whereas one HRBBHB did disseminate to the populace of

MAD

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HLHOABNOGOAGO said BBHHOB and OHLLB, and whereas the populace of FEJAUG does now clamor for fresh and bulky food against the wise counsel of the ROBNLOGABBGHH that food pills are far superior, thus upsetting the public order, it is hereby discovered that there has been a sag in the time tracks and that appropriate steps must be taken to rectify the error. Signed ULAB-GHLN."

Thereupon the workmen, with magnetic slings, wisked blasters out of their cars and made holes. After this they produced a dozen weighty hydraulic jacks which soon had their heads thrusting against the boulder-strewn road. Up, up, up went the road and then, abruptly, vanished.

Next they attacked the problem of the chalk road, working efficiently and without a sound. Up, up, up went the chalk road and then faded into nothingness.

The jacks were shifted and more holes blasted. And then the workmen had purchase on the metal road and, with them on it, it began to rise. Up, up, up!

Eben leaped for the edge and landed with a jar upon his own world's dirt track. Overhead the metal strip continued to lift and then, with a puff, it was no longer to be seen.

Lucy raised her head from cropping grass and looked thoughtfully at Eben. She gave a startled grunt as some clods of dirt dropped out of the clear sky and something sparkled as it hit her on the nose. She looked pained.

Dejectedly Eben dragged her over to the spring wagon and hitched her up. He sat for a while looking upward and then, with a shake of his head which designated complete abandonment of the whole thing he went over to where Lucy had been standing and picked up the diamond ring and two ruby bracelets which had fallen out of the bottom of the hole in which he had buried them.

THE NEXT morning Eben drove into his yard and was instantly almost devoured by an ecstatic Boozer. The dog leaped down out of the wagon and ran in circles, emitting glad yelps, which noise set the whole barnyard into an uproar.

"Mercy sakes," said Maria, coming to the door. "What! OH! EBEN!" And she raced to him as he was getting down and threw her arms about him, beginning to cry.

He pried her off, not urgently. "Here, here. No need to cry. I got home, didn't I?"

"Oh, Eben!" she wept. "I am so glad to see you! Five whole months and no word from you—"

"Five months!"

"Yes, five months! Oh, Eben, I th-thought you were d-d-d-dead!"

Eben looked about and saw for the first time that the fresh green of spring and not the dying green of fall was in the fields.

"Good gosh!" said Eben. "And without any plowing done!"

"I just knew something dreadful was going to happen when you left. What *did* happen?"

"I traded off my vegetables," said Eben. He put the ring and the bracelets in her hand. "These are for you. Now get me some dinner and let me get at this plowing. Good gosh! March and no plowing done!"

THE END.

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DOUBLED AND REDOUBLED

by MALCOLM JAMESON

He was in a rut, doing the same things every day—because every day was one day!

Illustrated by Kramer

THE very first thing that startled Jimmy Childers that extraordinary, repetitive June day was the alarm clock going off. It shouldn't have gone off. He remembered distinctly setting it at "Silent" when he went to bed the night before, and thumbing his nose derisively at it. He was a big shot now; he could get down to the office, along with the Westchesterites, at a quarter of ten, not at nine, as heretofore.

He rose on an elbow and hurled a pil-

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low at the jangling thing, then flopped back onto the pillow for a moment's luxurious retrospect.

Ah, what a day yesterday had been! The perfect day. The kind that happens only in fiction, or the third act of plays, when every problem is solved and every dream comes true all at once. He grinned happily. This time yesterday he had been a poor wage slave, a mere clerk; today he was head of a department. Until last evening the course of true love, as practiced by himself and Genevieve, had run anything but smoothly; this morning she was his bride-to-be. Twenty-four hours ago the name of Jimmy Childers was known only to a few hundred persons; all today's papers would carry his pictures and the commendations of the police and the mayor. Yesterday—

But why go on? Today was another day. Jimmy pulled himself together and got out of bed, making a slightly wry face as he did so. One only reached the utmost pinnacle once in his life; today, after yesterday, could only be anticlimactic. At ten he must hit the grit again. It would be a new kind of a grind, pitched on a higher level with higher and fresher ambitions, but a grind nevertheless. And so thinking, he reached for his clothes.

And that was when Jimmy Childers received jolts number two, three and so on! For the neatly wrapped packages delivered late yesterday afternoon from Livingston & Laird were not on the chair where he had placed them for the night. Nor was the nice, new pigskin wallet and the two hundred-odd dollars he had kept out as spending money from his race-track haul, anywhere to be seen. Even the empty jeweler's box that had contained Genevieve's ring was gone. Burglars!

Jimmy frowned in puzzlement. His door was spring-locked, but it was bolted, too. There was no transom, and the window was inaccessible from any other. It didn't make sense. He thought he would hardly make a row about it yet. Moreover, he was consoled by the thought that before going on his shopping spree yesterday, he had dropped by the bank and deposited a flat thousand. For reassurance, he slipped a hand into the inner pocket of his dangling coat and drew forth the little blue book.

The book was here, but the entry was not! Jimmy's eyes popped in unbelief. The last entry was May 15th, and for the usual ten dollars. Yet he remembered clearly Mr. Kleib's pleasantries as he chalked up the one-grand deposit. Why, it was only yesterday!

He glanced up at the calendar that hung behind the door. Each night he crossed the current day off. Last night he had not crossed it, but encircled it in a triple circle of red—the day of days! He suddenly went a little sick at the stomach as the rectangle of black figures stared back at him. The fourteenth of June was neither crossed off nor encircled. Jimmy Childers sat down and scratched his head, bewildered and dazed. Had he dreamed all that he thought had happened? Could it be that today was the fourteenth, and not the day after? Trembling a little, he finished dressing.

For a time he pondered his strange feelings. He tried to account for the disappearance of the things he had bought, remembering that the boys rooming down the hall had a way of borrowing without always telling. They *might* have come in last evening while he was out. As to the loss of the wallet, a pick-

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pocket might have lifted that, and he tried to recall occasions when he had been crowded or jostled. He gave it up. There was only the old hag on Riverside Drive, who had held out a scrawny, clutching hand for alms. Surely she couldn't have been the thief! He smiled to recollect her fawning gratitude when in his exuberance he had unexpectedly given her a five-spot, and her mumbling as she tottered on her way.

No. None of it fitted. As a matter of fact, now that he was going into such details, he remembered distinctly getting home *after that,* and putting the wallet and empty ring box on his dresser, winding the clock, and the rest. He sighed deeply. It was all so screwy.

He walked briskly from the house. He had decided to say nothing about his loss to Mrs. Tankersley. Upon second thought he would wait until he got to his office, then he would ring up the police commissioner personally. Hadn't he told him only yesterday that if he ever needed anything just give him a buzz? Jimmy felt very grandiose with his new connections. He had completely conquered his jitters when he stopped at the tobacco stand on the corner.

"Gimme a pack," he said, "and extra matches."

The clerk handed the cigarettes over, and then in a low, confidential voice added, "I gotta hot one for you today—Swiss Rhapsody in the first at Aqueduct. She's sure fire, even if she's a long shot. The dope is straight from Eddie Kelly—"

"Wake up," laughed Jimmy Childers, "that was yesterday!" He started to add, "Don't you remember my dropping by here last night and handing you a 'C' for the tip?" but for some reason choked it. The fellow evidently didn't remember it, or something. The situation was cockeyed again. So Jimmy said that much and stopped.

The clerk shook his head. "Not this nag. She hasn't been running."

"O. K.," said Childers, on a sudden impulse, and digging into his watch pocket he fished out four crumpled dollar bills. That was what he had to live on the rest of the week. "Two bucks—on the nose."

"You ain't making a mistake, pal," said the clerk.

The words startled Jimmy Childers more than anything else that had happened. Syllable for syllable the last exchange of sentences were identical with what had passed between them yesterday this time. Jimmy had the queer feeling, which comes over one at times, he was reliving something that had already happened. Hastily he pocketed his cigarettes and backed out of the place.

Downstairs in the subway station he snatched a paper and just made the crowded train, squeezing in the middle door into a solid mass of humanity. He was anxious to see whether his exploit in foiling the Midtown Bank robbery had made the first page or not, but it was not for several stations that he had the opportunity to open up his paper. Then he muttered savagely in dissatisfaction. The dealer had worked off yesterday's paper on him! He had read it all before—June 14th, PARIS FALLS. Bah!

"The young men of this generation have no manners whatever!" bleated a nagging, querulous voice behind him, and he felt a vicious dig at his ribs.

"I beg your pardon," he exclaimed,

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automatically nudging away to give what room he could.

"People go around sticking their elbows in other people's eyes, trying to read sensational trash!"

"I'm very sorry, madam," reiterated Jimmy Childers, making still more room. He was looking down into the snapping eyes of an acid-faced old beldam, and the sight of her made chills run up and down his spine. This very incident had occurred to him in every detail only yesterday. He felt very queer. Should he drop off and see a doctor? No, he decided, it was that damn vivid dream that still hung on to him.

Then, when the flurry caused by the tart old woman's eruption had subsided, he stole a glance over the shoulders of his neighbors. Some were reading one paper and some another, but they all had one thing in common. They were yesterday's papers! And their readers seemed content!

"Hell's bells," ejaculated Childers, "I *am* nuts."

At Thirty-fourth Street he got no shock, for the mad stampede of the office-bound herd is much the same, whatever the date. It was when he stepped into his own company's suite that fate biffed him squarely between the eyes again. Biff number one was that none of the other clerks took any special notice of him as he walked past the desks. The expected shower of congratulations did not materialize, nor for that matter, did the sour look of envy he expected to see on Miss Staunton's face. It was just like any other morning. It was just like yesterday morning, to be even more specific.

But he did not stop at his old desk in the outer office as he always had hitherto. He walked boldly on to the private office of the manager of the foreign department. It was not until he was within a pace of it that he halted in his stride, open-mouthed. The lettering on the door was not new gold-leaf at all, but the black paint that had always been there. It said simply, "Ernest Brown, Mgr."

He stared at it a moment, then turned and slowly made his way back to his old hangout in the clerk's offices. He hung up his hat and coat and sat down at the desk he had worked at for the past five years. Presently the office boy came bearing the trays of mail. Childers watched the deck of envelopes fall onto his blotter with tense anxiety. Somewhere in that batch of mail ought to be a test of his sanity. Or was it the reverse? He couldn't be sure. That damn dream had him so mixed up, he couldn't tell reality from pipe dream any more.

"I'm going to call my shots, from now on," he told himself. With a hand that was close to trembling he pulled a pad toward him and wrote down:

Acceptance and check for two hundred and fifty dollars in this morning's mail for a story I tossed off in my spare time and sent to the *Thursday Weekly*.

He turned the pad upside down and shot a cautious glance about the office. No one was paying him any attention. He ran through the envelopes. Yes, there it was. He almost tore the check as he snatched it out. Yes! The unexpected had happened, an impossible thing—his first effort at writing had been bought! He read the inclosed letter feverishly. Word for word it was the one in his dream. Now he knew that yesterday had not happened. For the *Weekly* wouldn't send out two

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checks for the same yarn. Would the rest of the day go the same way?

It did.

At nine thirty the messenger came and told him the boss wanted him at once. Jimmy Childers went with alacrity. For twenty-five minutes he had been sitting there, alternately chilled with fear and glowing with anticipation.

"Childers," said the Old Man, "we've watched you for some time and we like your style. Beginning tomorrow you'll have Mr. Brown's job in the foreign department. The pay will only be two hundred, but remember that we are jumping you over a lot of other people. You may take the rest of today off."

"Thank you, sir," said Jimmy Childers with every appearance of calm acceptance of his just dues as a capable employee, but all the time queer tremors were playing hob with his inner workings. "But if its all the same, I'll hang on as I am until noon at least. I would like to clean up my present desk before I leave it."

"A very commendable spirit," said the Old Man, cracking his cold face into the first smile he had ever let Childers see. That, too, had been in the dream. Childers was not sure whether he looked forward to the rest of the day with apprehension or what. It was a little disconcerting to know beforehand just how everything would turn out.

WHEN HE GOT BACK to his desk a puckish mood seized him.

"Oh, Miss Walters, will you take a letter, please."

"A-hum," he said, in his best executive manner, when she had settled beside him with her notebook. "To Mr. E. E. Frankenstein, Cylindrical Metal Castings—you know where—dear sir. In reply to your offer of this date of the position of stockmaster at your foundry, I beg to inform you that the job does not interest me and the salary you mention is ridiculous. Yours very truly—and so on and so on—the new title, you know."

"Why, Mr. Childers," exclaimed Miss Walters, "I didnt know *they* were trying to get you—"

Childers cocked an eye at the clock. He had timed it nicely. The messenger was approaching with a telegram in his hand.

"Read that to me," he said to the stenographer, with a lordly wave of the hand.

She tore the yellow envelope open and read the message aloud.

"How did you know?" she asked, wonder in her eyes.

"Hunch," he said laconically, and lit a cigarette.

"By golly," he told himself, "the dream is coming true, item by item." In succession he rang up Genevieve and made a date for that night; and then his bookmaker and doubled his bet on Swiss Rhapsody. Then he fell to thinking about the affair at the Midland Bank and that took some of the glow off. Hell, that fellow with the machine gun didn't miss him by much! Should he go through with it? He decided he would, for there were several details he had missed in the flurry of excitement in the dream. Moreover, he had pleasant memories of the fuss that was made over him afterward, not forgetting the standing reward of one thousand dollars offered by the protective agency. If he were to be married, and now he was sure he would be, any extra cash was very welcome.

He took the *Weekly's* check and

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strolled out of the office. First he stopped by the haberdashers and spent a most pleasant hour selecting gay ties, a suit, hat and various other items. Then, leaving the delivery address, he made his way to the bank.

He had a very queer feeling as he went through the portals—that uncomfortable sensation of having done it all before. His upward glance at the clock and the fact that exactly 12:03 registered firmly in his memory was a part of it. But he nerved himself for the ordeal and went straight to his usual teller's window.

He had just shoved the money under the wicket and knew uneasily that goose pimples had risen all over him when the expected happened. A low, husky voice said almost in his ear.

"Stand as you are, bud. Keep your hands on that marble shelf and don't turn around. This is a stick-up."

Then the voice said to Mr. Kleib: "Shell out—everything in the cage but the silver!"

Now!

Childers deliberately and without sense of direction, except that of the voice, kicked backward with all his force. He felt something soft give and then his heel crunched against bone. There was a curse and a moan, and he heard the clatter of the gun on the floor and the soft thud as his man slid to the marble.

In that instant pandemonium reigned. A huge howler over the door began its siren wail, Tommy-guns rattled, men shouted and women screamed.

Like a flash Jimmy Childers dropped to his hands and knees just as a stream of whizzing bullets spattered against the marble cage front. He grabbed up the fallen gun and turned it on the man that was firing at him, a short, stocky thug in a light-gray suit. He saw the man drop, and as he did another rushed past, headed for the door. Jimmy let the gun fall and launched himself in a flying tackle, grabbing at the fleeing gangster's knees.

The next couple of seconds was a maelstrom of sensation and confusion. Then he was aware of looking at the pants legs of some big man in blue, and a heavy Irish voice saying:

"Leggo, son, you've done enough. We've got him now."

Childers unwrapped his arms from the bandit's knees and got up. His heart was pounding wildly and he knew his clothes were a wreck, but it was a glorious moment and he didn't care. A circle of men were around him, men with notebooks and cameras and flashlight bulbs, snapping pictures and asking questions. Next, a big police car screamed its way to the front door, and in a moment he was receiving the unstinted congratulations of a fiery little mayor and his police commissioner.

"Nice work, Childers," said the latter. "Those eggs have been wanted a long, long time. If there is anything I can ever do for you, call on me."

Then the president of the bank came and whirled him away to the club for luncheon. What a day! Had so much ever happened to one man before in so short a space of time? And how odd that he had dreamed it all, even to the date of the vintage on the label of the sauterne the banker ordered with the lunch!

Suddenly he realized it was close to two thirty and the first at Aqueduct was probably already run. He excused himself and hastened over to Kelly's place.

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"I'll take it in big bills," he said to Kelly, as he went in.

"Optimistic, ain't you?" was Kelly's rejoinder. "Didja ever hear of nine horses falling down and breaking their legs in the same race? Well, that's what it'd take to let that milk-wagon nag—"

"They're off," announced the fellow with the headphones on.

"I'll still take it in big bills," said Jimmy, serenely.

"I'm damned," was Kelly's only comment, a couple of minutes later.

Jimmy Childers had two free hours that somehow were not covered by the dream. He remembered vaguely that he had deposited most of his winnings and then gone for a walk in the park. That he did, but his thoughts were so in the clouds and his pulse pounding so with the sense of personal well-being and triumph that he hardly remembered jumping impulsively into a cab and going to the most famous jeweler's in the world.

Later he mounted the steps in Genevieve's house, the ring snuggling in his pocket. He knew exactly how he was to be greeted—for once the pout would be off her face and in its place jubilant excitement. For the evening papers were full of his exploits at the bank, and the reporters had brought out the fact that that morning he had been made manager of the foreign department. The auspices for a favorable reception to his umpty-teenth proposal were good, to say the least.

They went to dinner, just as he knew they would, at the most expensive place in town.

Jimmy ordered carelessly, without a glance at the card.

"Yes, sir," said the waiter, with that bow that is bestowed only on those that know their way around.

"Why, Jimmy," she tittered, "you seem to be perfectly at home here."

"Oh, yes," he said carelessly, as he flipped the folds out of his napkin. He did not see fit to tell her that in the dream of yesterday—or was it today?—it had been only after thirty minutes study of the intricate card, to the tune of many acrimonious comments by Genevieve and the obvious disapproval of an impatient waiter, that he had picked that particular combination of food and drink. But it had been eminently satisfactory, so why not repeat?

As the evening wore on he found himself more and more eager to get to the place where that culminating kiss occurred. *That* was something he could repeat *ad infinitum,* whether in the flesh or a dream. And when it came, he was not disappointed. After that they had the little ritual of the ring, and still later his departure. His soul soared as it had never soared before.

Or rather, he reminded himself, a trifle ruefully, as it had never soared before in waking life. For after all, the day's triumphs had had just a little of the edge taken off by his certainty that they would occur.

And as he digested that thought, he concluded he would go straight home and to bed. After all, last night the only thing more he had done was stroll on the Drive, after paying the cigar-store clerk his tip, wrapped in his own glorious thoughts. No other incident had occurred worth reliving, as his pleasure at being able to give such a generous handout as a five-dollar bill was somewhat marred by the repulsiveness of the beggarly old crone who had received it.

So he went straight to his room,

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locked and bolted the door, and prepared for bed. Just before he turned off the light he surveyed the chair piled high with his purchases with immense satisfaction. Tomorrow he would go forth dressed as his new station in life required. His eye caught the calendar, and instead of striking out the day with his customary black cross, he encircled it twice in red. Then taking good care that the clock was wound, but not the alarm, he went to bed.

THE very first thing that startled Jimmy Childers that extraordinary repetitive June day was the alarm clock going off. It shouldn't have gone off. He remembered distinctly setting it at "Silent" when he went to bed the night before, and thumbing his nose derisively at it. He was a big shot now; he could get down to the office with the Westchesterites, at quarter of ten, not at nine, as heretofore.

He rose on an elbow and poised himself to hurl a pillow at the jangling thing. And then, THEN—

"Good Heaven!" he mumbled. "I've done all this before."

Angrily he bounded out of bed and choked off the offending clock. It took only a swift glance around the room to check the items, some quick sense told him were missing. There were no packages from the haberdasher's, nor ring box. And the calendar stared at him unsullied by red-penciled marks. It was the morning of June 14th!

He dressed in sullen rage, grumbling at his fate. He couldn't stand many double-barreled dreams like that one—they were too exhausting. He'd better see a doctor. And yet—yet it was all so *real*. He could have sworn that all those things had actually happened to him—twice! But then he stopped, more mystified than ever. They had differed somewhat in detail, those two days. He stopped and stared at himself in the mirror and noted he appeared a bit wild-eyed.

"I'll experiment, first," he decided, and hurried out, slamming the door behind.

At the cigar stand he asked the clerk, "How do you go about betting on the ponies?"

"I can take it," said the fellow, unenthusiastically.

"Here's two bucks," said Jimmy, "put it on Swiss Rhapsody—to win. I hope there's such a horse?"

"If you're not particular what you call a horse," said the clerk, with an air of sneering omniscience. "I'm surprised they let her run at all."

"Why?"

"It takes her so long to finish it throws all the other races late."

"Oh," said Jimmy Childers, but he let the bet stand.

He did not waste three cents on a paper that morning. One glance at the headlines was enough. He had practically memorized its contents two days before. But when he got in the subway he was very careful to give the nasty, quarrelsome-looking old woman who blocked his path as wide a berth as possible.

"Whippersnapper!" she exclaimed venomously, noting his scrupulous avoidance of her. There was a little flurry as people glanced up and had a look at him, then they went back to the reading of their stale newspapers. Jimmy Childers groaned. Was he in some squirrel cage of fate? Did everything have to always come out the same way, no matter what his approach? He

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resolved to make something come out differently, no matter what the cost.

This time he opened his letter containing the literary check without a tremor, and without joy. He knew he would spend the money, and how. He knew, too, that the things he purchased with it would vanish overnight, leaving him to do it all over again tomorrow. When the messenger came to tell him the big boss wanted him at once, Childers said coldly:

"I'm busy. Anyhow, it's no farther from his desk to mine than it is from mine to his."

The messenger gaped with awe, as if wondering whether lightning would strike. Then he stumbled off toward the chief's office.

"I don't think you understand, Childers," the big boss was saying a moment later, as he stood by Jimmy's desk. "Brown has left and we're giving you his job. It pays two hundred, you know."

"Not enough," replied Childers, gruffly.

"It's all we can afford just now," said the boss pleasantly. "But that's our offer. Think it over. It will be open for a week."

Jimmy Childers stared at his retreating back.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "And I got away with that!"

He went through the bank routine with little change, although he did think something of telephoning the police a tip-off and letting it go at that, but for some unknown but compelling reason he had to go through his act personally. But the thrill was gone. His walk in the park was much less joyous, as the more he tried to digest the strangely repetitive nature of his life the last three days, the more unhappy he became.

"It's like that old song about the broken record," he muttered sourly. "All the kick's gone out of things now." He didn't even bother to go to the jeweler's to select the ring. He knew the stock number by heart. So he merely phoned for it.

The kiss that night was up to par, which was some solace, but aside from that, getting engaged was not so much fun. There was no palpitation of the heart as he hung on her words, wondering what the answer would be. He already knew damn well what the answer would be. What kind of a life was that?

That night he threw the alarm clock out the window.

The very first thing that startled Jimmy Childers that—

"Damnation!" he growled, at the first tap of the awakening bell. He threw, not a pillow, but a heavy book, and watched with grim satisfaction as the face crystal smashed to tiny bits.

When he went out he avoided the cigar stand and took a bus, not the subway.

"Insufferable!" snorted the old hellion he sat down beside. He gasped. It was his nemesis of the subway. Apparently she had decided to vary her program a bit, too. He changed seats and listened with reddening cheeks to the titters of the other passengers.

At the office he had an unexpected telephone call. It was from the clerk at his corner cigar stand.

"Oh, Jimmy," he said, "I guess you were late this morning and didn't have time to leave your bet—so I placed one for you. Hope you don't mind?"

"What horse?" asked Childers, glumly.

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"Swiss Rhapsody. She's a long shot, but—"

Jimmy hung up and stared at the phone in front of him. He just couldn't get away from this thing.

All day long he tried to ring changes on his routine, and with astonishing minor results. But as to the major outcome there was never any difference. He was promoted, he won money, he saved the bank from robbery, he got engaged.

And the days that followed were no different. In the main, the events of June 14th had to be relived and relived until he found himself wincing at every one of the events that once had impressed him as such tremendous triumphs. Finally one day, during the hours usually devoted to the stroll in the park, he flung himself into a psychiatrist's office.

"Hm-m-m," commented the doctor, after he had smitten Childers' knees with little rubber mallets, and had scratched him on the feet and back with small prongs. "All I see are a few tremors. What's on your mind?"

"Plenty," said Jimmy savagely, and poured out his story.

"Hm-m-m," commented the doctor. "Interesting—most interesting."

He scribbled a prescription.

"Take this before you go to bed. It is simply something to make you sleep better. Then come back tomorrow at this same hour."

"Just one question, doctor."

"Yes?"

"What is today's date?"

"The fourteenth." The doctor smiled indulgently.

"And yesterday's?"

"The thirteenth. Come back tomorrow, please."

On the dot Jimmy Childers showed up at the doctor's office the next day—June the fourteenth, according to Childers' calendar. As he barged into the waiting room he was accosted with a chill:

"Name, please?"

He looked at the nurse in astonishment. Why, only the day before he had spent the best part of an hour dictating the answers of a questionnaire to her! He gave her a blank stare.

"The doctor is seen only by appointment," she added, looking at him disapprovingly.

"I . . . I made one yesterday," he stammered. "I was here . . . was examined!"

"You must be wrong," said she, sweetly. "Doctor just returned from Europe this morning."

"Oh, hell!" snarled Childers, and rushed from the place. He saw at once what a jam he was in. He had added another piece of furniture to his merry-go-round. That was all. He could very it within limits, of course, but he would never get anywhere.

JIMMY CHILDERS charged up and down the walks of the park in a frenzy. If only Sunday would come—something to break this vicious circle. But no, there was no way to get to Sunday. With him it was always Friday.

That night he skipped the call on Genevieve. Instead he called her up and made some flimsy, insulting excuse. All she said was:

"You old fibber. You're just shy. The ring came up and I'm *so* thrilled. Of course I'll marry you, you silly boy."

Weak and trembling he hung up. In his hand was a steamship ticket to

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Buenos Aires on the *Santa Mosca*, sailing at eleven p. m. He would try that on his jinx.

He got aboard all right, despite some arguments about a passport, and turned in at once, after dogging down the port and carefully locking the door. He took three of the tablets the doctor had prescribed instead of the one mentioned in the directions. If it were a dream, he ought to knock it now—different room, different bed, different environment, different everything. Jimmy closed his eyes. That night, the first for many a June 14th, he went to sleep with a ray of hope.

The very first thing that startled—

"Oh, Heaven!" sighed a haggard Jimmy Childers, as he shut off the clock, "another day of it."

HE WENT THROUGH the Red Book almost name by name. He shook his head hopelessly. He had tried almost everything from chiropractors to psychiatrists. Then he found a name that somehow he had skipped. It was under necromancers. At once he grabbed a taxi and flew to the address—a stinking hole under the Williamsburg Bridge.

"Sorry," said the macabre person he contacted, sitting placidly among his black velvet drapes in a "studio" calculated to send a strictly normal person into the heebie-jeebies, "but I only deal with the dead. That is my specialty. Now if you want a corpse raised, or anything like that—"

"No, no," said Jimmy hastily, and paid his fee and left. Outside he shuddered at the memory of the funereal atmosphere of the faker's joint. He hoped fervently that *this* episode wasn't going to get embroidered into the design. His error was in not knowing what a necromancer was. He went back to the Red Book. It just had oc-

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DOC SAVAGE

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

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curred to him that perhaps under sorcerers or thaumaturgists was what he wanted.

He found a lot of them, mostly in Harlem, and made a list.

The first four were as unsatisfactory as the necromancer, a circumstance that was very trying to Jimmy, for he could visit only one a day, using the blank two hours usually spent in the park. All the rest of the time he had to devote to the tedious business of being promoted, winning money, foiling robberies or making love.

But the fifth man was very much to Jimmy Childers' liking, after he recovered from the shock of the first interview. He found him in a dilapidated office in a shabby neighborhood in Greenpoint, and on the door was crudely lettered the frank but somewhat disconcerting legend, "Master Charlatan." Nevertheless Jimmy went boldly in.

"Ah," said the seer, after gazing for a while in a crystal sphere before him. "I perceive you are the victim of a blessing that misfired."

Jimmy Childers brought his eyes back to the bald-headed, fishy-eyed fat man who had guaranteed to help him. While the master charlatan had been in his semitrance Jimmy had been examining the charts that hung about. Obviously the man he had come to was versatile in the extreme, for there were diagrams of the human palm, knobs of the human cranium, weird charts of the heavens, and all the rest of the props that go with standard charlatanry.

"Now tell me something about this original fourteenth of June," said the sage. "How long ago was it, according to your reckoning?"

"Months and months," moaned Jimmy, thinking back on the intolerable monotony of it all.

"Can you recall the exact details of the first day—I mean the very first one—the prototype?"

"I doubt it," confessed Jimmy. "You see, I've wriggled around and monkeyed with it so much that I'm all balled up."

"Try," said the wise one, calmly.

Hesitantly Jimmy Childers told his story, as best he could remember it, all the way to his going to bed the night of the genuine fourteenth of June.

"Now you begin to interest me," suddenly said the master, opening his eyes from the apparent slumber into which he had relapsed the moment Jimmy had begun talking. "Tell me more about that beggar woman on the Drive. Was she toothless except for a single yellow fang? Did her knuckles come to about her knees? Was she blind in her left eye?"

"Yes, yes," agreed Jimmy eagerly.

"Aha!" ejaculated the seer, "I thought so. Minnie the Malicious!" He made a note. "I'll report this to the Guild. She was disbarred long ago—for malpractice and incompetence."

Jimmy looked mystified.

"She used to be a practicing witch," explained the great one with a shrug, "now she is just a chiseler. You know . . . cheap curses, pretty enchantments and the like. But just what did she say to you, and *most particularly*, what kind of wishes did you make just after you left her?"

"Well," admitted Jimmy, "she came up whining and asked for a penny. I was feeling pretty high, so I gave her a five-spot."

"That was a mistake," murmured the sorcerer.

"That's all," said Jimmy, suddenly

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concluding. "She mumbled something, and I walked on."

"But you wished something?"

"Well, I do remember—don't forget what a wonderful day I'd had—that I was wishing every day was like that, or that I could live it over again, or something of the sort."

"Be very exact," insisted his interrogator.

"Sorry," said Jimmy.

"Let's go into the Mesmeric Department," said his consultant, leading the way into a shabby interior room. "Now sit there and keep your eye on the little jeweled light," he ordered.

IT SEEMED only an instant before Jimmy woke up. The master charlatan was sitting in front of him placidly looking at him.

"Your exact wish," he said, "was a triple one, as I suspected. They usually are. Here are your mental words, 'Oh, I wish every day was like this one; I wish I could live it over again; I wish I'd never seen that old hag, she gives me the creeps.'"

"So what?" queried Jimmy, recalling it now.

"When you gave her such a magnificent present, she mumbled out that you would have your next three wishes granted. Oddly enough, if she had been an able practitioner, nothing would have happened—"

"That doesn't make sense," objected Jimmy.

"Oh, yes it does. You see, your last wish would have had the effect of canceling the others, as you would never have met her, see?"

"It is a little involved," frowned Jimmy.

"Yes, these things have a way of getting involved," admitted the wise one. "However, since she was a low-powered witch, so to speak, only the first wish came fully true, that is, every day—for you—was like that one. By the time you had gotten to the second one some of the punch was out of it. You didn't *quite* live it over again. You had the power of varying it a little, which was a very fortunate circumstance, as otherwise you would have gone on doing it forever and ever."

"You mean I'm cured!" exclaimed Jimmy delightedly.

"Not so fast. When we come to the last wish, her power had petered out almost altogether. It did not do away with the fact that you *had* met her, but it was strong enough to cause you to avoid meeting her any more."

"I see," said Jimmy, hoping he really did.

"Now what you've got to do is to live that day over once more—the first one, mind you—including meeting Minnie; only the minute she mumbles, reverse your wish. That cancels everything."

"But I can't remember that day well enough—"

"I'll coach you," said the mesmerist. "While you were hypnotized I took it all down, every detail."

An hour later Jimmy Childers rose to go. He paid over to the magician all the money he had just collected on Swiss Rhapsody. The old man dropped it into his pocket with just the hint of a chuckle.

"By the way," asked Jimmy, on the threshold, "what day is *this?*"

"That, my friend," replied the master charlatan with an oily smile, "is a mystery I'd advise you not to look into. Good day!"

THE END.

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SHOTTLE BOP

by THEODORE STURGEON

● **The sign said simply "Shottle Bop—We Sell Bottles with Things in Them"—and meant it!**

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

I'd never seen the place before, and I lived just down the block and around the corner. I'll even give you the address, if you like. "The Shottle Bop," between Twentieth and Twenty-first

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Streets, on Tenth Avenue in New York City. You can find it if you go there looking for it. Might even be worth your while, too.

But you'd better not.

"The Shottle Bop." It got me. It was a small shop with a weather-beaten sign swung from a wrought crane, creaking dismally in the late fall wind. I walked past it, thinking of the engagement ring in my pocket and how it had just been handed back to me by Audrey, and my mind was far removed from such things as shottle bops. I was thinkng that Audrey might have used a gentler term than "useless" in describing me; and her neatly turned remark about my being a "constitutional psychopathic incompetent" was as uncalled-for as it was spectacular. She must have read it somewhere, balanced as it was by "And I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth!" which is a notably worn cliché.

"Shottle Bop!" I muttered, and then paused, wondering where I had picked up such oddly rhythmic syllables with which to express myself. I'd seen it on that sign, of course, and it had caught my eye. "And what," I asked myself, "might be a Shottle Bop?" Myself replied promptly, "Dunno. Toddle back and have a look." So toddle I did, back along the east side of Tenth, wondering what manner of man might be running such an establishment in pursuance of what kind of business. I was enlightened on the second point by a sign in the window, all but obscured by the dust and ashes of apparent centuries, which read:

WE SELL BOTTLES

There was another line of smaller print there. I rubbed at the crusted glass with my sleeve and finally was able to make out

With things in them.

Just like that:

WE SELL BOTTLES
With things in them.

Well of course I went in. Sometimes very delightful things come in bottles, and the way I was feeling, I could stand a little delighting.

"Close it!" shrilled a voice, as I pushed through the door. The voice came from a shimmering egg adrift in the air behind the counter, low-down. Peering over, I saw that it was not an egg at all, but the bald pate of an old man who was clutching the edge of the counter, his scrawny body streaming away in the slight draft from the open door, as if he were made of bubbles. A mite startled, I kicked the door with my heel. He immediately fell on his face, and then scrambled smiling to his feet.

"Ah, it's so good to see you again," he rasped.

I think his vocal cords were dusty, too. Everything else here was. As the door swung to, I felt as if I were inside a great dusty brain that had just closed its eyes. Oh yes, there was light enough. But it wasn't the lamp light and it wasn't daylight. It was like—like light reflected from the cheeks of pale people. Can't say I enjoyed it much.

"What do you mean, 'again'?" I asked irritably. "You never saw me before."

"I saw you when you came in and I fell down and got up and saw you again," he quibbled, and beamed. "What can I foo for do?"

"Huh?" I huhed, and then translated

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it into "What can I do for you?"

"Oh," I said. "Well, I saw your sign. What have you got in a bottle that I might like?"

"What do you want?"

"What've you got?"

He broke into a piping chant—I remember it yet, word for word.

"For half a buck, a vial of luck
Or a bottle of nifty breaks
Or a flask of joy, or Myrna Loy
For luncheon with sirloin steaks.

"Pour out a mug from this old jug,
And you'll never get wet in rains.
I've bottles of grins and racetrack wins
And lotions to ease your pains.

"Here's bottles of imps and wet-pack shrimps
From a sea unknown to man,
And an elixir to banish fear,
And the sap from the pipes of Pan.

"With the powdered horn of a unicorn
You can win yourself a mate;
With the rich hobnob; or get a job—
It's yours at a lowered rate."

"Now wait right there!" I snapped. "You mean you actually sell dragon's blood and ink from the pen of Friar Bacon and all such mumbo-jum?"

He nodded rapidly and smiled all over his improbable face.

I went on—"The genuine article?"

He kept on nodding.

I regarded him for a moment. "You mean to stand there with your teeth in your mouth and your bare face hanging out and tell me that in this day and age, in this city and in broad daylight, you sell such trash and then expect me—me, an enlightened intellectual—"

"You are very stupid and twice as bombastic," he said quietly.

I GLOWERED at him and reached for the doorknob—and there I froze. And I mean froze. For the old man whipped out an ancient bulb-type atomizer and squeezed a couple of whiffs at me as I turned away; and so help me, *I couldn't move!* I could cuss, though, and boy, did I.

The proprietor hopped over the counter and ran over to me. He must have been standing on a box back there, for now I could see he was barely three feet tall. He grabbed my coat tails, ran up my back and slid down my arm, which was extended doorward. He sat down on my wrist and swung his feet and laughed up at me. As far as I could feel, he weighed absolutely nothing.

When I had run out of profanity—I pride myself on never repeating a phrase of invective—he said, "Does that prove anything to you, my cocky and unintelligent friend? That was the essential oil from the hair of the Gorgon's head. And until I give you an antidote, you'll stand there from now till a week from text Nuesday!"

"Get me out of this," I roared, "or I smack you so hard you lose your brains through the pores in your feet!"

He giggled.

I tried to tear loose again and couldn't. It was as if all my epidermis had turned to high-carbon steel. I began cussing again, but quit in despair.

"You think altogether too much of yourself," said the proprietor of the Shottle Bop. "Look at you! Why, I wouldn't hire you to wash my windows. You expect to marry a girl who is accustomed to the least of animal comfort, and then you get miffed because she turns you down. Why does she turn you down? Because you won't get a job. You're a no-good. You're a bum. He, he! And you have the nerve to walk around pelling people where to get off. Now if I were in your position I

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would ask politely to be released, and then I would see if anyone in this shop would be good enough to sell you a bottle full of something that might help out."

Now I never apologize to anybody, and I never back down, and I never take any guff from mere tradesmen. But this was different. I'd never been petrified before, nor had my nose rubbed in so many galling truths. I relented. "O. K., O. K.; let me break away then. I'll buy something."

"Your tone is sullen," he said complacently, dropping lightly to the floor and holding his atomizer at the ready. "You'll have to say 'Please. Pretty please.'"

"Pretty please," I said, almost choking with humiliation.

He went back of the counter and returned with a paper of powder which he had me sniff. In a couple of seconds I began to sweat, and my limbs lost their rigidity so quickly that it almost threw me. I'd have been flat on my back if the man hadn't caught me and solicitously led me to a chair. As strength dribbled back into my shocked tissues, it occurred to me that I might like to flatten this hobgoblin for pulling a trick like that. But a strange something stopped me—strange because I'd never had the experience before. It was simply the idea that once I got outside I'd agree with him for having such a low opinion of me.

He wasn't worrying. Rubbing his hands briskly, he turned to his shelves. "Now let's see . . . what would be best for you, I wonder? Hm-m-m. Success is something you couldn't justify. Money? You don't know how to spend it. A good job? You're not fitted for one." He turned gentle eyes on me and shook his head. "A sad case. *Tsk, tsk.*" I crawled. "A perfect mate? Uh-huh. You're too stupid to recognize perfection, too conceited to appreciate it. I don't think that I can— Wait!"

He whipped four or five bottles and jars off the dozens of shelves behind him and disappeared somewhere in the dark recesses of the store. Immediately there came sounds of violent activity—clinkings and little crashes; stirrings and then the rapid susurrant grating of a mortar and pestle; then the slushy sound of liquid being added to a dry ingredient during stirring; and at length, after quite a silence, the glugging of a bottle being filled through a filtering funnel. The proprietor reappeared triumphantly bearing a four-ounce bottle without a label.

"This will do it!" he beamed.

"That will do what?"

"Why, cure you!"

"Cure—" My pompous attitude, as Audrey called it, returned while he was mixing. "What do you mean cure? I haven't got anything!"

"My dear little boy," he said offensively, "you most certainly have. Are you happy? Have you ever been happy? No. Well, I'm going to fix all that up. That is, I'll give you the start you need. Like any other cure, it requires your co-operation.

"You're in a bad way, young fellow. You have what is known in the profession as retrogressive metempsychosis of the ego in its most malignant form. You are a constitutional unemployable; a downright sociophagus. I don't like you. Nobody likes you."

Feeling a little bit on the receiving end of a blitz, I stammered, "W-what do you aim to do?"

He extended the bottle. "Go home. Get into a room by yourself—the smaller

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the better. Drink this down, right out of the bottle. Stand by for developments. That's all."

"But—what will it do to me?"

"It will do nothing *to* you. It will do a great deal *for* you. It can do as much for you as you want it to. But mind me, now. As long as you use what it gives you for your self-improvement, you will thrive. Use it for self-glorification, as a basis for boasting, or for revenge, and you will suffer in the extreme. Remember that, now."

"But what is it? How—"

"I am selling you a talent. You have none now. When you discover what kind of a talent it is, it will be up to you to use it to your advantage. Now go away. I still don't like you."

"What do I owe you?" I muttered, completely snowed under by this time.

"The bottle carries its own price. You won't pay anything unless you fail to follow my directions. Now will you go, or must I uncork a bottle of jinn—and I don't mean London Dry?"

"I'll go," I said. I'd seen something swirling in the depths of a ten-gallon carboy at one end of the counter, and I didn't like it a bit. "Good-by."

"Bood-gy," he returned.

I went out and I headed down Tenth Avenue and I turned east up Twentieth Street and I never looked back. And for many reasons I wish now that I had, for there was, without doubt, something very strange about that Shottle Bop.

I DIDN'T simmer down until I got home; but once I had a cup of black Italian coffee under my belt I felt better. I was skeptical about it at last. I was actually inclined to scoff. But somehow I didn't want to scoff too loudly. I looked at the bottle a little scornfully, and there was a certain something about the glass of it that seemed to be staring back at me. I sniffed and threw it up behind some old hats on top of the closet, and then sat down to unlax. I used to love to unlax. I'd put my feet on the doorknob and slide down in the upholstery until I was sitting on my shoulder blades, and as the old saying has it, "Sometimes I sets and thinks, and sometimes I just sets." The former is easy enough, and is what even an accomplished loafer has to go through before he reaches the latter and more blissful state. It takes years of practice to relax sufficiently to be able to "just set." I'd learned it years ago.

But just as I was about to slip into the vegetable status, I was annoyed by something. I tried to ignore it. I manifested a superhuman display of lack of curiosity, but the annoyance persisted. A light pressure on my elbow, where it draped over the arm of the chair. I was put in the unpleasant predicament of having to concentrate on what it was; and realizing that concentration on anything was the least desirable thing there could be. I gave up finally, and with a deep sigh, opened my eyes and had a look.

It was the bottle.

I screwed up my eyes and then looked again, but it was still there. The closet door was open as I had left it, and its shelf almost directly above me. Must have fallen out. Feeling that if the damn thing were on the floor it couldn't fall any farther, I shoved it off the arm of the chair with my elbow.

It bounced. It bounced with such astonishing accuracy that it wound up in exactly the same spot it had started from—on the arm of the easy-chair, by my elbow. Startled, I shoved it violently. This time I pushed it hard enough to send it against the wall, from

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which it rebounded to the shelf under my small table, and thence back to the chair arm—and this time it perched cozily against my shoulder. Jarred by the bouncing, the stopper hopped out of the bottle mouth and rolled into my lap; and there I sat, breathing the bitter-sweet fumes of its contents, feeling frightened and silly as hell.

I grabbed the bottle and sniffed. I'd smelled that somewhere before—where was it? Uh—oh, yes; that mascara the Chinese honkytonk girls use in Frisco. The liquid was dark—smoky black. I tasted it cautiously. It wasn't bad. If it wasn't alcoholic, then the old man in the shop had found a darn good substitute for alcohol. At the second sip I liked it and at the third I really enjoyed it and there wasn't any fourth because by then the little bottle was a dead marine. That was about the time I remembered the name of the black ingredient with the funny smell. Kohl. It is an herb the Orientals use to make it possible to see supernatural beings. Silly superstition!

And then the liquid I'd just put away, lying warm and comfortable in my stomach, began to fizz. Then I think it began to swell. I tried to get up and couldn't. The room seemed to come apart and throw itself at me piecemeal, and I passed out.

Don't you ever wake up the way I did. For your own sake, be careful about things like that. Don't swim up out of a sodden sleep and look around you and see all those things fluttering and drifting and flying and creeping and crawling around you—puffy things dripping blood, and filmy, legless creatures, and little bits and snatches of pasty human anatomy. It was awful. There was a human hand afloat in the air an inch away from my nose; and at my startled gasp it drifted away from me, fingers fluttering in the disturbed air from my breath. Something veined and bulbous popped out from under my chair and rolled across the floor. I heard a faint clicking, and looked up into a gnashing set of jaws without any face attached. I think I broke down and cried a little. I know I passed out again.

The next time I awoke—must have been hours later, because it was broad daylight and my clock and watch had both stopped—things were a little better. Oh, yes, there were a few of the horrors around. But somehow they didn't bother me much now. I was practically convinced that I was nuts; now that I had the conviction, why worry about it? I dunno; it must have been one of the ingredients in the bottle that had calmed me down so. I was curious and excited, and that's about all. I looked around me and I was almost pleased.

The walls were green! The drab wallpaper had turned to something breathtakingly beautiful. They were covered with what seemed to be moss; but never moss like that grew for human eyes to see before. It was long and thick, and it had a slight perpetual movement—not that of a breeze, but of growth. Fascinated, I moved over and looked closely. Growing indeed, with all the quick magic of spore and cyst and root and growth again to spore; and the swift magic of it was only a part of the magical whole, for never was there such a green. I put out my hand to touch and stroke it, but I only felt the wallpaper. But when I closed my fingers on it, I could feel that light touch of it in the palm of my hand, the weight of twenty sunbeams, the soft resilience of jet-darkness in a closed place. The

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sensation was a delicate ecstasy, and never have I been happier than I was at that moment.

Around the baseboards were little snowy toadstools, and the floor was grassy. Up the hinged side of the closet door climbed a mass of flowering vines, and their petals were hued in tones indescribable. I felt as if I had been blind until now, and deaf, too; for now I could hear the whispering of scarlet, gauzy insects among the leaves and the constant murmur of growth. All around me was a new and lovely world, so delicate that the wind of my movements tore petals from the flowers, so real and natural that it defied its own impossibility. Awestruck, I turned and turned, running from wall to wall, looking under my old furniture, into my old books; and everywhere I looked I found newer and more beautiful things to wonder at. It was while I was flat on my stomach looking up at the bed springs, where a colony of jewellike lizards had nested, that I first heard the sobbing.

It was young and plaintive, and had no right to be in my room where everything was so happy. I stood up and looked around, and there in the corner crouched the translucent figure of a little girl. She was leaning back against the wall. Her thin legs were crossed in front of her, and she held the leg of a tattered toy elephant dejectedly in one hand and cried into the other. Her hair was long and dark, and it poured and tumbled over her face and shoulders.

I said, "What's the matter, kiddo?" I hate to hear a child cry like that.

She cut herself off in the middle of a sob and shook the hair out of her eyes, looking up and past me, all fright and olive skin and big, filled violet eyes. "Oh!" she squeaked.

I repeated, "What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

She hugged the elephant to her breast defensively, and whimpered, "W-where are you?"

Surprised, I said, "Right here in front of you, child. Can't you see me?"

She shook her head. "I'm scared. Who are you?"

"I'm not going to hurt you. I heard you crying, and I wanted to see if I could help you. Can't you see me at all?"

"No," she whispered. "Are you an angel?"

I guffawed. "By no means!" I stepped closer and put my hand on her shoulder. The hand went right through her and she winced and shrank away, uttering a little wordless cry. "I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't mean . . . you can't see me at all? I can see you."

She shook her head again. "I think you're a ghost," she said.

"Do tell!" I said. "And what are you?"

"I'm Ginny," she said. "I have to stay here, and I have no one to play with." She blinked, and there was a suspicion of further tears.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

"I came here with my mother," she said. "We lived in lots of other rooming houses. Mother cleaned floors in office buildings. But this is where I got so sick. I was sick a long time. Then one day I got off the bed and came over here, but then when I looked back I was still on the bed. It was awful funny. Some men came and put the 'me' that was on the bed onto a stretcher-thing and took it—me—out.

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After a while Mummy left, too. She cried for a long time before she left, and when I called to her she couldn't hear me. She never came back, and I just got to stay here."

"Why?"

"Oh, I got to. I—don't know why. I just—got to."

"What do you do here?"

"I just stay here and think about things. Once a lady lived here, had a little girl just like me. We used to play together until the lady watched us one day. She carried on somethin' awful. She said her little girl was possessed. The girl kept callin' me, 'Ginny! Ginny! Tell Mamma you're here!'; an' I tried, but the lady couldn't see me. Then the lady got scared an' picked up her little girl an' cried, an' so I was sorry. I ran over here an' hid, an' after a while the other little girl forgot about me, I guess. They moved," she finished with pathetic finality.

I was touched. "What will become of you, Ginny?"

"I dunno," she said, and her voice was troubled. "I guess I'll just stay here and wait for Mummy to come back. I been here a long time. I guess I deserve it, too."

"Why, child?"

She looked guiltily at her shoes. "I couldn' stand feelin' so awful bad when I was sick. I got up out of bed before it was time. I shoulda stayed where I was. This is what I get for quittin'. But Mummy'll be back; just you see."

"Sure she will," I muttered. My throat felt tight. "You take it easy, kid. Any time you want someone to talk to, you just pipe up. I'll talk to you any time I'm around."

She smiled, and it was a pretty thing to see. What a raw deal for a kid! I grabbed my hat and went out.

Outside things were the same as in the room to me. The hallways, the dusty stair carpets wore new garments of brilliant, nearly intangible foliage. They were no longer dark, for each leaf had its own pale and different light. Once in a while I saw things not quite so pretty. There was a giggling thing that scuttled back and forth on the third floor landing. It was a little indistinct, but it looked a great deal like Barrelhead Brogan, a shanty-Irish bum who'd returned from a warehouse robbery a year or so ago, only to shoot himself accidentally with his own gun. I wasn't sorry.

Down on the first floor, on the bottom step, I saw two youngsters sitting. The girl had her head on the boy's shoulder, and he had his arms around her, and I could see the banister through them. I stopped to listen. Their voices were faint, and seemed to come from a long way away.

He said, "There's one way out."

She said, "Don't talk that way, Tommy!"

"What else can we do? I've loved you for three years, and we still can't get married. No money, no hope—no nothing. Sue, if we did do it, I just *know* we'd always be together. Always and always—"

After a long time she said, "All right, Tommy. You get a gun, like you said." She suddenly pulled him even closer. "Oh, Tommy, are you sure we'll always be together just like this?"

"Always," he whispered, and kissed her. "Just like this."

Then there was a long silence, while neither moved. Suddenly they were as I had first seen them, and he said:

"There's only one way out."

And she said, "Don't talk that way, Tommy!"

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And he said, "What else can we do? I've loved you for three years—" It went on like that, over and over and over.

I felt lousy. I went on out into the street.

IT BEGAN to filter through to me what had happened. The man in the shop had called it a "talent." I couldn't be crazy, could I? I didn't *feel* crazy. The draught from the bottle had opened my eyes on a new world. What was this world?

It was a thing peopled by ghosts. There they were—storybook ghosts, and regular haunts, and poor damned souls—all the fixings of a storied supernatural, all the things we have heard about and loudly disbelieve and secretly wonder about. So what? What had it all to do with me?

As the days slid by, I wondered less about my new, strange surroundings, and gave more and more thought to that question. I had bought—or been given—a talent. I could see ghosts. I could see all parts of a ghostly world, even the vegetation that grew in it. That was perfectly reasonable—the trees and birds and fungi and flowers. A ghost-world is a world as we know it, and a world as we know it must have vegetation. Yes, I could see them. But they couldn't see me!

O. K.; what could I get out of it? I couldn't talk about it or write about it because I wouldn't be believed; and besides, I had this thing exclusive, as far as I knew; why cut a lot of other people in on it?

On what, though?

No; unless I could get a steer from somewhere, there was no percentage in it for me that I could see. And then, about six days after I took that eye-opener, I remember the one place where I might get that steer.

The Shottle Bop!

I was on Sixth Avenue at the time, trying to find something in a five-and-dimie that Ginny might like. She couldn't touch anything I brought her, but she enjoyed things she could look at—picture books and such. By getting her a little book of photographs of trains since the "De Witt Clinton," and asking her which of them was like ones she had seen, I found out approximately how long it was she'd been there. Nearly eighteen years. Anyway, I got my bright idea and headed for Tenth Avenue and the Shottle Bop. I'd ask that old man—he'd tell me.

At the corner of Ninth Avenue I bumped into Happy Sam Healy and Fred Bellew. Fred was good people, but I never had much use for Happy Sam. He went for shaggy hats and lapelled vests, and he had patent-leather hair and too much collar-ad good looks. I was in a hurry and didn't want to talk to anyone, but Sam grabbed me by the arm.

"Slow down, mug, slow down! Long time no see. Where you bound in such a hurry?"

"Going over to Tenth to see a man about you."

Sam quit grinning and Fred walked over. "Why can't you guys quit knocking each other?" he asked quietly.

If it weren't for Fred, Sam and I would have crossed bows even more than we did, which was still altogether too much.

"I'll always speak civilly to a human being," I said. "Sam's different."

Sam said, "Don't set yourself up, chum. I'm cutting some ice with a certain party that froze you out."

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"If you say exactly what you mean, I'll probably rap you for it," I flared.

Fred pushed hastily between us. "I'll see you later, Sam," he said. He pushed me with some difficulty away from the scene.

Sam stood staring after us for a minute and then put his hands in his pockets, shrugged, grinned, and went jauntily his own way.

"Aw, why do you always stand in front of that heel when I want to scrape him off the sidewalk?" I complained.

"Calm down, you big lug," Fred grinned. "That bantam wants trouble with you because of Audrey. If you mess him up, he'll go running to her about it, and you'll be really out."

"I am ready, so what?"

He glanced at me. "That's up to you." Then, seeing my face, he said quickly, "O. K., don't tell me. It's none of my business. I know. How've you been?"

I was quiet for a while, walking along. Fred was a darn good egg. You could tell a guy like that practically anything. Finally I said, "I'm looking for a job, Fred."

He nodded, "Thought you would. Doing what?" Anybody else, knowing me, would have hooted and howled.

"Well, I—" Oh, what the hell, I thought, I'll tell him. If he thinks I'm nuts, he won't say so to anyone but me. Old Fred didn't look like much, with his sandy hair and his rimless specs and those stooped shoulders that too much book reading gave him, but he had sense.

"I was walking down Tenth," I began—

By the time I had come to the part about the ghost of the kid in my room, we had reached Tenth Avenue in the late Twenties, and turned south. I wasn't paying much attention to where we were, to tell you the truth, and that's why what happened did happen.

Before I had a chance to wind up with the question that was bothering me—"I have it . . . what will I do with it?" Fred broke in with "Hey! Where is this place of yours?"

"Why—between Nineteenth and Twentieth," I said. "Holy smoke—we're at Eighteenth! We walked right past it!"

Fred grinned and swung around. We went back up the avenue with our eyes peeled, and not a sign of the Shottle Bop did we see. For the first time a doubtful look crept onto Fred's bland face. He said:

"You wouldn't kid me, would you, lug?"

"I tell you—" I began.

Then I saw a penny lying on the sidewalk. I bent to pick it up, and heard him say, "Hey! There it is! Come on."

"Ah! I knew it was on this block!" I said, and turned toward Fred. Or where Fred had been. Facing me was a blank wall. The whole side of the block was void of people. There was no sign of a shop or of Fred Bellew.

I stood there for a full two minutes not even daring to think. Then I walked downtown toward Twentieth, and then uptown to Twenty-first. Then I did it again. No shop. No Bellew.

I stood frothing on the uptown corner: What had that guy done; hopped a passing truck or sunk into the ground or vanished into the shop? Yeah; and no shop there! A wise guy after all. I trod the beat once more with the same results. Then I headed for home. I hadn't gone twenty feet when I heard the pound of someone running, and Fred

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came panting up and caught my shoulder. We both yelped at once—. "Hey! Where've you been?".

I said, "What was the idea of ducking out like that? Man, you must've covered a hundred yards in about six seconds to get away from me while I picked up a penny off the sidewalk!"

"Duck out nothing!" said Bellew, angrier than I'd ever seen him. "I saw the store and went in. I thought you were right behind me. I look around and you're outside, staring at the shop like it was something you didn't believe. Then you walk off. Meanwhile the little guy in the store tries to sell me some of his goods. I stall him off, still looking for you. You walk past two or three times, looking in the window. I call you; you don't bat an eyelash. I tell the little guy: Hold on—I'll be back in a second with my friend there. He rears back on his heels and laughs like a maniac and waves me out. Come on, dope. Let's go back. That old man really has something there. I'd say I was in the market for some of that stuff of his!"

"O. K., O. K.," I said. "But Fred—I'll swear I didn't see the place. Come on then; lead me to it. I must be going really screwball."

"Seems like," said Fred.

So we went back, and there was no shop at all. Not a sign of one. And then and there we had one pip of an argument. He said I'd lied about it in the first place, and I said, well, why did he give me that song-and-dance about his seeing it, and he said it was some kind of a joke I'd pulled on him; and then we both said, "Oh, yeah?" a couple of times and began to throw punches. I broke his glasses for him. He had them in his pocket and fell down on them. I wound up minus a very good friend and without my question answered—what was I going to do with this "talent"?

I WAS TALKING to Ginny one afternoon about this and that when a human leg, from the knee down, complete and puffy, drifted between us. I recoiled in horror, but Ginny pushed it gently with one hand. It bent under the touch, and started toward the window, which was open a little at the bottom. The leg floated toward the crack and was sucked through like a cloud of cigarette smoke, reforming again on the other side. It bumbled against the pane for a moment and then ballooned away.

"My gosh!" I breathed. "What *was* that?"

Ginny laughed. "Oh, just one of the Things that's all 'e time flying around. Did it scare you? I used to be scared, but I saw so many of them that I don't care any more, so's they don't light on me."

"But what in the name of all that's disgusting are they?"

"Parts." Ginny was all childish savoir-faire.

"Parts of what?"

"People, silly. It's some kind of a game, *I* think. You see, if someone gets hurt and loses something—a finger or an ear or something, why, the ear—the *inside* part of it, I mean, like me being the inside of the 'me' they carried out of here—it goes back to where the person who owned it lived last. Then it goes back to the place before that, and so on. It doesn't go very fast. Then when something happens to a whole person, the 'inside' part comes looking for the rest of itself. It picks up bit after bit—Look!" She put out a filmy forefinger

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and thumb and nipped a flake of gossamer out of the air.

I leaned over and looked closely; it was a small section of semitransparent human skin, ridged and whorled.

"Somebody must have cut his finger," said Ginny matter-of-factly, "while he was living in this room. When something happens to um—you see! He'll be back for it!"

"Good heavens!" I said. "Does this happen to everyone?"

"I dunno. Some people have to stay where they are—like me. But I guess

It was startling at first when ghostly parts of people drifted by—

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if you haven't done nothing to deserve bein' kept in one place, you have to come all around pickin' up what you lost."

I'd thought of more pleasant things in my time.

FOR SEVERAL DAYS I'd noticed a gray ghost hovering up and down the block. He was always on the street, never inside. He whimpered constantly. He was—or had been—a little inoffensive man of the bowler hat and starched collar type. He paid no attention to me—none of them did, for I was apparently invisible to them. But I saw him so often that pretty soon I realized that I'd miss him if he went away. I decided I'd chat with him the next time I saw him.

I left the house one morning and stood around for a few minutes in front of the brownstone steps. Sure enough, pressing through the flotsam of my new, weird coexistent world, came the slim figure of the wraith I had noticed, his rabbit face screwed up, his eyes deep and sad, and his swallowtail coat and striped waistcoat immaculate. I stepped up behind him and said, "Hi!"

He started violently and would have run away, I'm sure, if he'd known where my voice was coming from.

"Take it easy, pal," I said. "I won't hurt you."

"Who are you?"

"You wouldn't know if I told you," I said. "Now stop shivering and tell me about yourself."

He mopped his ghostly face with a ghostly handkerchief, and then began fumbling nervously with a gold toothpick. "My word," he said. "No one's talked to me for years. I'm not quite myself, you see."

"I see," I said. "Well, take it easy. I just happen to've noticed you wandering around here lately. I got curious. You looking for somebody?"

"Oh, no," he said. Now that he had a chance to talk about his troubles, he forgot to be afraid of this mysterious voice from nowhere that had accosted him. "I'm looking for my home."

"Hm-m-m," I said. "Been looking a long time?"

"Oh, yes." His nose twitched. "I left for work one morning a long time ago, and when I got off the ferry at Battery Place I stopped for a moment to watch the work on that new-fangled elevated railroad they were building down there. All of a sudden there was a loud noise—my goodness! It was terrible—and the next thing I knew I was standing back from the curb and looking at a man who looked just like me! A girder had fallen, and—my word!" He mopped his face again. "Since then I have been looking and looking. I can't seem to find anyone who knows where I might have lived, and I don't understand all the things I see floating around me, and I never thought I'd see the day when grass would grow on lower Broadway—oh, it's terrible." He began to cry.

I felt sorry for him. I could easily see what had happened. The shock was so great that even his ghost had amnesia! Poor little egg—until he was whole, he could find no rest. The thing interested me. Would a ghost react to the usual cures for amnesia? If so, then what would happen to him?

"You say you got off a ferryboat?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have lived on the Island . . . Staten Island, over there across the bay!"

"You really think so?" He stared through me, puzzled and hopeful.

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"Why sure! Say, how'd you like me to take you over there? Maybe we could find your house."

"Oh, that would be splendid! But—oh, my, what will my wife say?"

I grinned. "She might want to know where you've been. Anyway, she'll be glad to have you back, I imagine. Come on; let's get going!"

I GAVE HIM a shove in the direction of the subways and strolled along behind him. Once in a while I got a stare from a passer-by for walking with one hand out in front of me and talking into thin air. It didn't bother me very much. My companion, though, was very self-conscious about it, for the inhabitants of his world screeched and giggled when they saw him doing practically the same thing. Of all humans, only I was invisible to them, and the little ghost in the bowler hat blushed from embarrassment until I thought he'd burst.

We hopped a subway—it was a new experience for him, I gathered—and went down to South Ferry. The subway system in New York is a very unpleasant place to one gifted as I was. Everything that enjoys lurking in the dark hangs out there, and there is quite a crop of dismembered human remains. After this day I took the bus.

We got a ferry without waiting. The little gray ghost got a real kick out of the trip. He asked me about the ships in the harbor and their flags, and marveled at the dearth of sailing vessels. He *tsk, tsked* at the Statue of Liberty; the last time he had seen it, he said, was while it still had its original brassy gold color, before it got its patina. By this I placed him in the late '70s; he must have been looking for his home for over sixty years!

We landed at the Island, and from there I gave him his head. At the top of Fort Hill he suddenly said, "My name is John Quigg. I live at 45 Fourth Avenue!" I've never seen anyone quite so delighted as he was by the discovery. And from then on it was easy. He turned left, and then right, and then left again, straight down for two blocks and again right. I noticed—he didn't—that the street was marked "Winter Avenue." I remembered vaguely that the streets in this section had been numbered years ago.

He trotted briskly up the hill and then suddenly stopped and turned vaguely. "I say, are you still with me?"

"Still here," I said.

"I'm all right now. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this. Is there anything I could do for you?"

I considered. "Hardly. We're of different times, you know. Things change."

He looked, a little pathetically, at the new apartment house on the corner and nodded. "I think I know what happened to me," he said softly. "But I guess it's all right. . . . I made a will, and the kids were grown." He sighed. "But if it hadn't been for you I'd still be wandering around Manhattan. Let's see—ah; come with me!"

He suddenly broke into a run. I followed as quickly as I could. Almost at the top of the hill was a huge old shingled house, with a silly cupola and a complete lack of paint. It was dirty and it was tumble-down, and at the sight of it the little fellow's face twisted sadly. He gulped and turned through a gap in the hedge and down beside the house. Casting about in the long grass, he spotted a boulder sunk deep into the turf.

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"This is it," he said. "Just you dig under that. There is no mention of it in my will, except a small fund to keep paying the box rent. Yes, a safety-deposit box, and the key and an authorization are under that stone. I hid it"—he giggled—"from my wife one night, and never did get a chance to tell her. You can have whatever's any good to you." He turned to the house, squared his shoulders, and marched in the side door, which banged open for him in a convenient gust of wind. I listened for a moment and then smiled at the tirade that burst forth. Old Quigg was catching real hell from his wife, who'd sat waiting for over sixty years for him! It was a bitter stream of invective, but—well, she must have loved him. She couldn't leave the place until she was complete, if Ginny's theory was correct, and she wasn't really complete until her husband came home! It tickled me. They'd be all right now!

I FOUND an old pinchbar in the drive and attacked the ground around the stone. It took quite a while and made my hands bleed, but after a while I pried the stone up and was able to scrabble around under it. Sure enough, there was an oiled silk pouch under there. I caught it up and carefully unwrapped the strings around it. Inside was a key and a letter addressed to a New York bank, designating only "Bearer" and authorizing use of the key. I laughed aloud. Little old meek and mild John Quigg, I'd bet, had set aside some "mad money." With a layout like that, a man could take a powder without leaving a single sign. The son-of-a-gun! I would never know just what it was he had up his sleeve, but I'll bet there was a woman in the case. Even fixed it up with his will! Ah, well—I should kick!

It didn't take me long to get over to the bank. I had a little trouble getting into the vaults, because it took quite a while to look up the box in the old records. But I finally cleared the red tape, and found myself the proud possessor of just under eight thousand bucks in small bills—and not a yellowback among 'em!

Well, from then on I was pretty well set. What did I do? Well, first I bought clothes, and then I started out to cut ice for myself. I clubbed around a bit and got to know a lot of people, and the more I knew the more I realized what a lot of superstitious dopes they were. I couldn't blame anyone for skirting a ladder under which crouched a genuine basilisk, of course, but what the heck—not one in a thousand have beasts under them! Anyway, my question was answered. I dropped two grand on an elegant office with drapes and dim indirect lighting, and I got me a phone installed and a little quiet sign on the door—Psychic Consultant. And, boy, I did all right.

My customers were mostly upper crust, because I came high. It was generally no trouble to get contact with people's dead relatives, which was usually what they wanted. Most ghosts are crazy to get in contact with this world anyway. That's one of the reasons that almost anyone can become a medium of sorts if he tries hard enough; Lord knows that it doesn't take much to contact the average ghost. Some, of course, were not available. If a man leads a pretty square life, and kicks off leaving no loose ends, he gets clear. I never did find out where these clear spirits went to. All I knew was that they weren't to be contacted. But the vast majority of people have to go back and tie up those loose ends after they die—righting a little wrong here, help-

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ing someone they've hindered, cleaning up a bit of dirty work. That's where luck itself comes from, I do believe. You don't get something for nothing.

If you get a nice break, it's been arranged that way by someone who did you dirt in the past, or someone who did wrong to your father or your grandfather or your great-uncle Julius. Everything evens up in the long run, and until it does, some poor damned soul is wandering around the earth trying to do something about it. Half of humanity is walking around crabbing about its tough breaks. If you and you and you only knew what dozens of powers were begging for the chance to help you if you'll let them! And if you let them, you'll help clear up the mess they've made of their lives here, and free them to go wherever it is they go when they're cleaned up. Next time you're in a jam, go away somewhere by yourself and open your mind to these folks. They'll cut in and guide you all right, if you can drop your smugness and your mistaken confidence in your own judgment.

I had a couple of ghostly stooges to run errands for me. One of them, an ex-murderer by the name of One-eye Rachuba, was the fastest spook ever I saw, when it came to locating a wanted ancestor; and then there was Professor Grafe, a frog-faced teacher of social science who'd embezzled from a charity fund and fallen into the Hudson trying to make a getaway. He could trace the most devious genealogies in mere seconds, and deduce the most likely whereabouts of the ghost of a missing relative. The pair of them were all the office force I could use, and although every time they helped out one of my clients they came closer to freedom for themselves, they were both so entangled with their own sloppy lives that I was sure of their services for years.

But do you think I'd be satisfied to stay where I was, making money hand over fist without really working for it? Oh, no. Not me. No, I had to big-time. I had to brood over the events of the last few months, and I had to get dramatic about that screwball Audrey, who really wasn't worth my trouble. I had to lie awake nights thinking about Happy Sam and his gibes. It wasn't enough that I'd proved Audrey wrong when she said I'd never amount to anything. I wasn't happy when I thought about Sam and the eighteen a week he pulled down driving a light delivery truck. Uh-huh. I had to show them up.

I even remembered what the little man in the Shottle Bop had said to me about using my "talent" for bragging or for revenge. That didn't make any difference to me. I figured I had the edge on everyone, everything. Cocky, I was. Why, I could send one of my ghostly stooges out any time and find out exactly what anyone had been doing three hours ago come Michaelmas. With the shade of the professor at my shoulder, I could back-track on any far-fetched statement and give immediate and logical reasons for back-tracking. No one had anything on me, and I could out-talk, out-maneuver, and out-smart anyone on earth. I was really quite a feller. I began to think, "What's the use of my doing as well as this when the gang on the West Side don't know anything about it?" and "Man, would that half-wit Happy Sam burn up if he saw me drifting down Broadway in my new eight-thousand-dollar roadster!" and "To think I used to waste my time and tears on a dope like Audrey!" In other

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words, I was tripping up on an inferiority complex. I acted like a veridam fool, which I was. I went over to the West Side.

It was a chilly, late winter night. I'd taken a lot of trouble to dress myself and my car so we'd be bright and shining and would knock some eyes out. Pity I couldn't brighten my brains up a little.

I drove up in front of Casey's pool room, being careful to do it too fast, and concentrating on shrieks from the tires and a shuddering twenty-four-cylinder roar from the engine before I cut the switch. I didn't hurry to get out of the car, either. Just leaned back and lit a fifty-cent cigar, and then tipped my hat over one ear and touched the horn button, causing it to play "Tuxedo Junction" for forty-eight seconds. Then I looked over toward the pool hall.

Well, for a minute I thought that I shouldn't have come, if that was the effect my return to the fold was going to have. And from then on I forgot about anything except how to get out of here.

THERE WERE two figures slouched in the glowing doorway of the pool room. It was up a small side street, so short that the city had depended on the place, an old institution, to supply the street lighting. Looking carefully, I made out one of the silhouetted figures as Happy Sam, and the other was Fred Bellew. They just looked out at me; they didn't move; they didn't say anything, and when I said, "Hiya, small fry—remember me?" I noticed that along the darkened walls flanking the bright doorway were ranked the whole crowd of them—the whole gang. It was a shock; it was a little too casually perfect. I didn't like it.

"Hi," said Fred quietly. I knew he wouldn't like the big-timing. I didn't expect any of them to like it, of course, but Fred's dislike sprang from distaste, and the others' from resentment, and for the first time I felt a little cheap. I climbed out over the door of the roadster and let them have a gander at my fine feathers.

Sam snorted and said, "Jellybean!" very clearly! Someone else giggled, and from the darkness beside the building came a high-pitched, "Woo-woo!"

I walked up to Sam and grinned at him. I didn't feel like grinning. "I ain't seen you in so long I almost forgot what a heel you were," I said. "How you making?"

"I'm doing all right," he said, and added offensively, "I'm still *working* for a living."

The murmur that ran through the crowd told me that the really smart thing to do was to get back into that shiny new automobile and hoot along out of there. I stayed.

"Wise, huh?" I said weakly.

They'd been drinking, I realized—all of them. I was suddenly in a spot. Sam put his hands in his pockets and looked at me down his nose. He was the only short man that ever could do that to me. After a thick silence he said:

"Better get back to yer crystal balls, phony. We like guys that sweat. We even like guys that have rackets, if they run them because they're smarter or tougher than the next one. But luck and gab ain't enough. Scram."

I looked around helplessly. I was getting what I'd begged for. What had I expected, anyway? Had I thought that these boys would crowd around and shake my hand off for acting this way? There was something missing

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somewhere, and when I realized what it was, it hit me. Fred Bellew—he was just standing there saying nothing. The old equalizer wasn't functioning any more. Fred wasn't aiming to stop any trouble between me and Sam. I was never so alone in my life!

THEY hardly moved, but they were all around me suddenly. If I couldn't think of something quickly, I was going to be mobbed. And when those mugs started mobbing a man, they did it up just fine. I drew a deep breath.

"I'm not asking for anything from you, Sam. Nothing; that means advice, see?"

"You're gettin' it!" he flared. "You and your seeanses. We heard about you. Hanging up widdow-women for fifty bucks a throw to talk to their 'dear departed'! P-sykik investigator! What a line! Go on; beat it!"

I had a leg to stand on now. "A phony, huh? Why you gabby Irishman, I'll bet I could put a haunt on you that would make that hair of yours stand up on end, if you have guts enough to go where I tell you to."

"You'll bet? That's a laugh. Listen at that, gang." He laughed, then turned to me and talked through one side of his mouth. "All right, you wanted it. Come on, rich guy; you're called. Fred'll hold the stakes. How about ten of your lousy bucks for every one of mine? Here, Fred—hold this sawbuck."

"I'll give you twenty to one," I said half hysterically. "And I'll take you to a place where you'll run up against the homeliest, plumb-meanest old haunt you ever heard of."

The crowd roared. Sam laughed with them, but didn't try to back out. With any of that gang, a bet was a bet. He'd taken me up, and he'd set odds, and he was bound. I just nodded and put two

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century notes into Fred Bellew's hand. Fred and Sam climbed into the car, and just as we started, Sam leaned out and waved.

"See you in hell, fellas," he said. "I'm goin' to raise me a ghost, and one of us is going to scare the other one to death!"

I honked my horn to drown out the whooping and hollering from the sidewalk and got out of there. I turned up the parkway and headed out of town.

"Where to?" Fred asked after a while.

"Stick around," I said, not knowing.

There must be some place not far from here where I could find an honest-to-God haunt, I thought, one that would make Sam back-track and set me up with the boys again. I opened the compartment in the dashboard and let Ikey out. Ikey was a little twisted imp who'd got his tail caught in between two sheets of steel when they were assembling the car, and had to stay there until it was junked.

"Hey, Ike," I whispered. He looked up, the gleam of the compartment light shining redly in his bright little eyes. "Whistle for the professor, will you? I don't want to yell for him because those mugs in the back seat will hear me. They can't hear you."

"O. K., boss," he said; and putting his fingers to his lips, he gave vent to a blood-curdling, howling scream.

That was the prof's call-letters, as it were. The old man flew ahead of the car, circled around and slid in beside me through the window, which I'd opened a crack for him.

"My goodness," he panted, "I wish you wouldn't summon me to a location which is traveling with this high degree of celerity. It was all I could do to catch up with you."

"Don't give me that, professor," I whispered. "You can catch a stratoliner if you want to. Say, I have a guy in the back who wants to get a real scare from a ghost. Know of any around here?"

The professor put on his ghostly pince-nez. "Why, yes. Remember my telling you about the Wolfmeyer place?"

"Golly—he's bad."

"He'll serve your purpose admirably. But don't ask me to go there with you. None of us ever associates with Wolfmeyer. And for Heaven's sake, be careful."

"I guess I can handle him. Where is it?"

He gave me explicit directions, bade me good night and left. I was a little surprised; the professor traveled around with me a great deal, and I'd never seen him refuse a chance to see some new scenery. I shrugged it off and went my way. I guess I just didn't know any better.

I HEADED out of town and into the country to a certain old farmhouse. Wolfmeyer, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, had hung himself there. He had been, and was, a bad egg. Instead of being a nice guy about it all, he was the rebel type. He knew perfectly well that unless he did plenty of good to make up for the evil, he'd be stuck where he was for the rest of eternity. That didn't seem to bother him at all. He got surly and became a really bad spook. Eight people had died in that house since the old man rotted off his own rope. Three of them were tenants who had rented the place, and three were hobos, and two were psychic investigators. They'd all hung themselves. That's the way Wolfmeyer worked. I think he really

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enjoyed haunting. He certainly was thorough about it anyway.

I didn't want to do any real harm to Happy Sam. I just wanted to teach him a lesson. And look what happened!

We reached the place just before midnight. No one had said much, except that I told Fred and Sam about Wolfmeyer, and pretty well what was to be expected from him. They did a good deal of laughing about it, so I just shut up and drove. The next item of conversation was Fred's, when he made the terms of the bet. To win, Sam was to stay in the house until dawn. He wasn't to call for help and he wasn't to leave. He had to bring in a coil of rope, tie a noose in one end and string the other up on "Wolfmeyer's Beam"—the great oaken beam on which the old man had hung himself, and eight others after him. This was as an added temptation to Wolfmeyer to work on Happy Sam, and was my idea. I was to go in with Sam, to watch him in case the thing became dangerous. Fred was to stay in the car a hundred yards down the road and wait.

I parked the car at the agreed distance and Sam and I got out. Sam had my tow rope over his shoulder, already noosed. Fred had quieted down considerably, and his face was dead serious.

"I don't think I like this," he said, looking up the road at the house. It hunched back from the highway, and looked like a malign being deep in thought.

I said, "Well, Sam? Want to pay up now and call it quits?"

He followed Fred's gaze. It sure was a dreary-looking place, and his liquor had fizzed away. He thought a minute, then shrugged and grinned. I had to admire the rat. "Hell, I'll go through with it. Can't bluff me with scenery, phony."

Surprisingly, Fred piped up, "I don't think he's a phony, Sam. He showed me something one day, over on Tenth Avenue. A little store. There was something funny about it. We had a little scrap afterward, and I was sore for a long time, but—I think he has something there."

The resistance made Sam stubborn, though I could see by his face that he knew better. "Come on, phony," he said and swung up the road.

We climbed into the house by way of a cellar door that slanted up to a window on the first floor. I hauled out a flashlight and lit the way to the beam. It was only one of many that delighted in turning the sound of one's footsteps into laughing whispers that ran round and round the rooms and halls and would not die. Under the famous beam the dusty floor was dark-stained.

I gave Sam a hand in fixing the rope, and then clicked off the light. It must have been tough on him then. I didn't mind, because I knew I could see anything before it got to me, and even then, no ghost could see me. Not only that, for me the walls and floors and ceilings were lit with the phosphorescent many-hued glow of the ever-present ghost plants. For its eerie effect I wished Sam could see the ghost-molds feeding greedily on the stain under the beam.

Sam was already breathing heavily, but I knew it would take more than just darkness and silence to get his goat. He'd have to be alone, and then he'd have to have a visitor or so.

"So long, kid," I said, slapping him on the shoulder; and I turned and walked out of the room.

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I let him hear me go out of the house and then I crept silently back. It was without doubt the most deserted place I have ever seen. Even ghosts kept away from it, excepting, of course, Wolfmeyer's. There was just the luxurious vegetation, invisible to all but me, and the deep silence rippled by Sam's breath. After ten minutes or so I knew for certain that Happy Sam had more guts than I'd ever have credited him with. He had to be scared. He couldn't —or wouldn't—scare himself.

I crouched down against the wall of an adjoining room and made myself comfortable. I figured Wolfmeyer would be along pretty soon. I hoped earnestly that I could stop the thing before it got too far. No use in making this any more than a good lesson for a wiseacre. I was feeling pretty smug about it all, and I was totally unprepared for what happened.

I was looking toward the doorway opposite when I realized that for some minutes there had been the palest of pale glows there. It brightened as I watched; brightened and flickered gently. It was green, the green of things moldy and rotting away; and with it came a subtly harrowing stench. It was the smell of flesh so very dead that it had ceased to be really odorous. It was utterly horrible, and I was honestly scared out of my wits. It was some moments before the comforting thought of my invulnerability came back to me, and I shrank lower and closer to the wall and watched.

And Wolfmeyer came in.

His was the ghost of an old, old man. He wore a flowing, filthy robe, and his bare forearms thrust out in front of him were stringy and strong. His head, with its tangled hair and beard, quivered on a broken, ruined neck like the blade of a knife just thrown into soft wood. Each slow step as he crossed the room set his head to quivering again. His eyes were alight; red they were, with deep green flames buried in them. His canine teeth had lengthened into yellow, blunt tusks, and they were like pillars supporting his crooked grin. The putrescent green glow was a horrid halo about him. He was a bright and evil thing.

He passed me, completely unconscious of my presence, and paused at the door of the room where Sam waited by the rope. He stood just outside it, his claws extended, the quivering of his head slowly dying. He stared in at Sam, and suddenly opened his mouth and howled. It was a quiet, deadly sound, one that might have come from the throat of a distant dog, but, though I couldn't see into the other room, I knew that Sam had jerked his head around and was staring at the ghost. Wolfmeyer raised his arms a trifle, seemed to totter a bit, and then moved into the room.

I SNAPPED myself out of the crawling terror that gripped me and scrambled to my feet. If I didn't move fast—

Tiptoeing swiftly to the door, I stopped just long enough to see Wolfmeyer beating his arms about erratically over his head, a movement that made his robe flutter and his whole figure pulsate in the green light; just long enough to see Sam on his feet, wide-eyed, staggering back and back toward the rope. He clutched his throat and opened his mouth and made no sound, and his head tilted, his neck bent, his twisted face gaped at the ceiling as he clumped backward away from the ghost and into the ready noose. And then I leaned

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over Wolfmeyer's shoulder, put my lips to his ear, and said:

"Boo!"

I almost laughed. Wolfmeyer gave a little squeak, jumped about ten feet, and, without stopping to look around, high-tailed out of the room so fast that he was just a blur. That was one scared old spook!

At the same time Happy Sam straightened, his face relaxed and relieved, and sat down with a bump under the noose. That was as close a thing as ever I want to see. He sat there, his face soaking wet with cold sweat, his hands between his knees, staring limply at his feet.

"That'll show you!" I exulted, and walked over to him. "Pay up, scum, and may you starve for that week's pay!" He didn't move. I guess he was plenty shocked.

"Come on!" I said. "Pull yourself together, man! Haven't you seen enough? That old fellow will be back any second now. On your feet!"

He didn't move.

"Sam!"

He didn't move.

"Sam!" I clutched at his shoulder. He pitched over sideways and lay still.

He was quite dead.

I didn't do anything and for a while I didn't say anything. Then I said hopelessly, as I knelt there, "Aw, Sam. Sam—cut it out, fella."

After a minute I rose slowly and started for the door. I'd taken three steps when I stopped. Something was happening! I rubbed my hand over my eyes. Yes, it—it was getting dark! The vague luminescence of the vines and flowers of the ghost-world was getting dimmer, fading, fading—

But that had never happened before!

No difference. I told myself desperately, it's happening now, all right. *I got to get out of here!*

See? You see? It was the stuff—that damn stuff from the Shottle Bop. It was wearing off! When Sam died it . . . it stopped working on me! Was this what I had to pay for the bottle? Was this what was to happen if I used it for revenge?

The light was almost gone—and now it was gone. I couldn't see a thing in the room but one of the doors. Why could I see that doorway? What was that pale-green light that set off its dusty frame?

Wolfmeyer!

I got to get out of here!

I couldn't see ghosts any more. Ghosts could see me now. I ran. I darted across the dark room and smashed into the wall on the other side. I reeled back from it, blood spouting from between the fingers I slapped to my face. I ran again. Another wall clubbed me. Where was that other door? I ran again, and again struck a wall. I screamed and ran again. I tripped over Sam's body. My head went through the noose. It whipped down on my windpipe, and my neck broke with an agonizing crunch. I floundered there for half a minute, and then dangled.

Dead as hell, I was. Wolfmeyer, he laughed and laughed.

Fred found me and Sam in the morning. He took our bodies away in the car. Now I've got to stay here and haunt this damn old house. Me and Wolfmeyer.

THE END.

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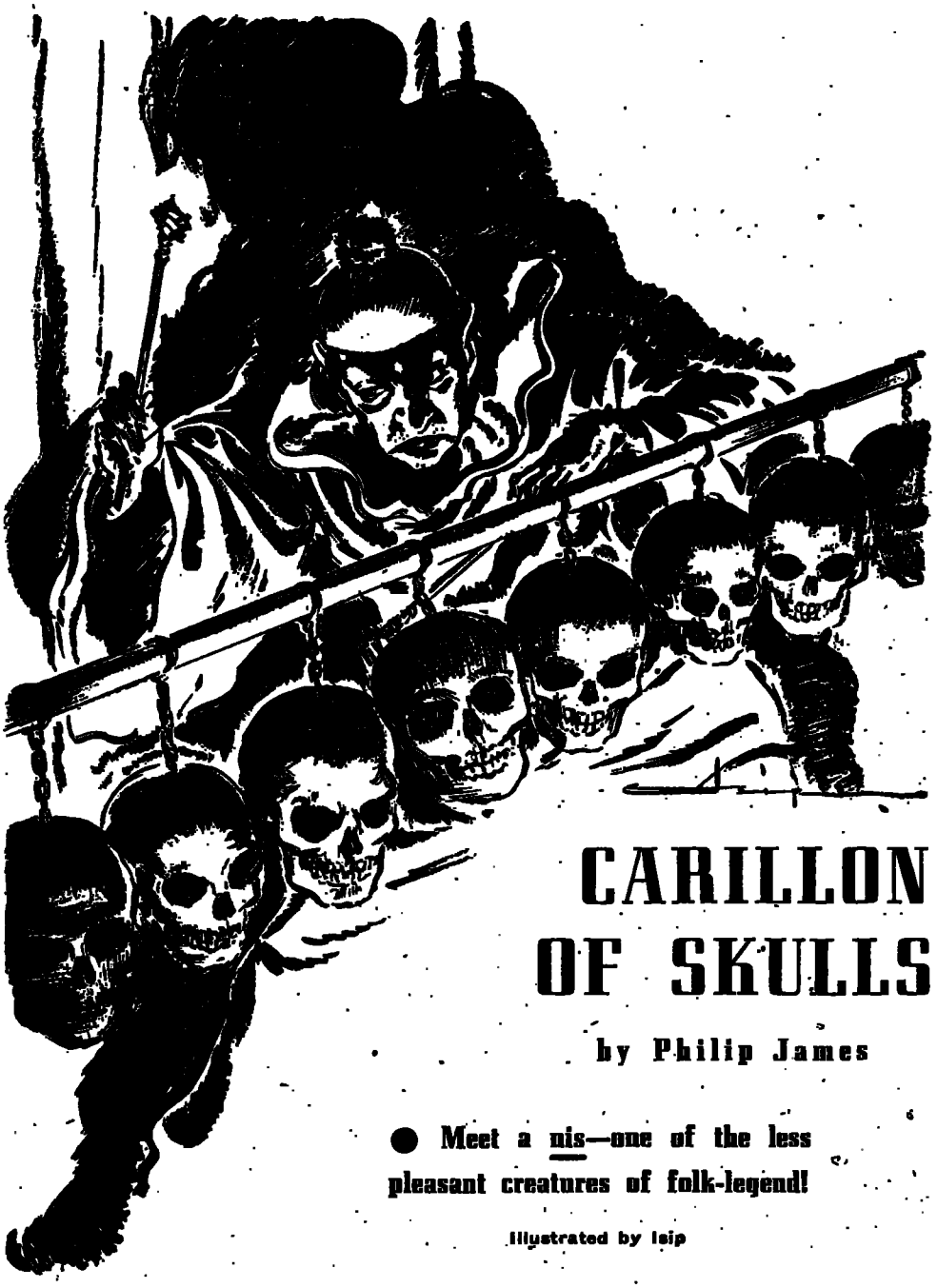

CARILLON OF SKULLS

by Philip James

● Meet a nis—one of the less pleasant creatures of folk-legend!

Illustrated by Isip

ANN MULLER ran a pale hand down the massive bole of the single oak, standing out in forsaken grandeur over the ruins of Lefferts Park, and gripped tightly on a shaggy outcropping of its bark. Through a hole in the tattered leaves overhead she saw angry clouds scudding across the sky, and watched

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the last thread of the moon vanish, leaving the park a pit of sordid black. She shuddered and old words slipped through her teeth.

"How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord? For ever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me? My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

"Strange words from you, dearie." The voice piped up from the blackness near her, ending in a cackling hiccup. A thin shaft of moonlight trickled down again, showing an old crone with dirty gray hair and the ragged shreds of former beauty still clinging to the reddened face. "Strange names you're calling on this night, I'm thinking. Hee!"

Ann dropped her hand from the tree and nodded faintly. "Perhaps. You're late, Mother Brian. Did you find the remedy?"

"That I did, and simple enough, too. Dried dust of balsam needles, the book said, and I have it with me. Here's your bag with it, though I'd not open the same, was I you. And the bullet. What you'll be doing, though—"

"Your pay," the girl suggested, stripping a curious green-set ring from her finger. "It's all I have now."

Mother Brian—Madame Olga, the seeress, she called herself now—pushed it aside. "Then you keep it, dearie. I've whiskey money this night, and you used to be a good girl, once. It's a long memory only that brings Madame Olga into this God-forsaken place, not pay. Hee! A sweet girl, if a bit headstrong and foolish before—"

"Yes. Thank you, Mother Brian. What night is it?"

"Friday." She bit the word out reluctantly, and the girl jerked back at it, her fingers trembling as she caught at the oak bark again. In the dark, the old dealer in spells stretched forth a solicitous hand.

"Friday! Are you sure?" Ann's eyes strained against the darkness, and saw truth on the other's face. "Then that's why *he* was with me when I woke. He doesn't trust me now, but whispers his orders in my ear while I'm sleeping."

"Lot of good it'll do him this night. They've a police guard all about the place so only them as know the old tunnel can squeeze through the bulls and get in. It's an empty night for him, the slimy thing. For a thimble of smoke, I'd be—"

"No." Ann interrupted again, wearily. She was strangely tired, and the assurance of Madame Olga failed to bring hope with it. "No, they wouldn't believe you, and he'd—hunt. You'd better leave now, Mother Brian. He might come."

"Hee! He'll be busy still." But she turned away and went creaking out through the gloom with a grunted farewell.

Ann slumped against the tree, noting that the rift in the clouds was only a brief flash this time, and that it promised to be the last that night. But her eyes were accustomed to the dark, and she watched the old figure hobble away, down into a weed-grown hole, and out of sight toward safety.

Then she twitched her shoulders and stepped out from under the tree, picking her way through the tangle around. At one time Lefferts Park had been the mecca of the amusement-minded, with theater, roller-skating rink, picnic grounds, and places where barkers announced the admission price was "only a thin dime, folks, the tay-yenth paht of a dollah." But that had been years before.

Now weeds and sumac had overgrown

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it, crowding against the few deserted beech trees. Where the wooden recreation buildings and flashy theater had been, there was only an irregular series of pockmarks in the ground, cellars half filled in by dirty cans, bottles, and general débris, or crumbling foundation walls, overgrown with a mossy fungus of some kind. Charred boards and cinders of old dead fires showed that the last occupants had been bums seeking its weedy privacy for the night.

ANN PICKED her way with uncannily sure feet through the maze, hardly glancing at the tangle about her. She was thinking of other things, chiefly of *him* and his reasons, and her thoughts were barely rational. If only the control wer less complete, so that she could pierce through to his object, or remember details, if— But there were too many ifs. It was Friday night, when his commands were always strongest; what those commands were or had been was hazy, but the repressed memories in the back of her mind filled her with a dread that was greater because of its vague uncertainty.

She skirted the roller skating pavilion, an area treacherous with covered holes, and slipped quickly past what had been the Apollo Theater. Across town a bell sounded, laboring under the twelve strokes of midnight, and yellowish light began to shine through the back windows of the theater. They were getting ready for another performance, apparently, though the marquee was still either missing or hidden by the shadows. Probably her duties would lead her there before the night finished.

The gateway leading from the park was in front of her then, and she looked out cautiously. Mother Brian had been right; two police were moving slowly up and down in front. Some of their words spilled back to her.

"'Tis the very broth of hell's kettle in there, MacDougall, I'm thinking. I'd put face to the Old One himself before I'd be sleeping in there, sure as my name's O'Halloran."

"Aye."

"Yet fools there are, and newspapermen, like as not the one under two names. Devil a bit of it do I like."

"Aye."

Back in the park, a shrill burble of sound keened out in what might have been a laugh or a shriek of derision. O'Halloran hunched his big shoulders and scowled in its general direction. "Faith, what a noise, not human at all, at all. Well, 'twas probably the wind a-howling through a hole. No need to be looking again for what made it, d'you think? Better to stick to our beat."

"Aye."

THE GIRL turned back aimlessly, still mumbling over the dark suspicions in her mind. That shriek had been *his* voice, directed at her for loitering, Ann knew, but what good were his orders if no one entered the park? Of course, there was no one there, so she had nothing to fear. He—but who was he? Something probed at her mind, and vanished leaving her standing there uncertainly. She knew where she was, but how had she got there, and why? What was she doing at night in Lefferts Park? She was sure she had known an instant before, but now the memory eluded her.

Then she was conscious of being cold, and the faint smell of wood smoke coming to her from the back of the park. Someone must have a fire there that would offer warmth and companionship until her vagrant memory returned. She

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shivered and moved forward toward it, now picking out her way carefully, and stumbling a little over the tangled ruins under her feet. Down in a hollow beyond her, sheltered by the corner of a wall that still stood, she caught a flicker of yellow light, and hastened toward it, drawing the inconspicuous dark suit closer to her thin, small body, and clutching tightly on the odd handbag, decorated with bright beads and closed at the top by means of a drawstring.

There was a man at the fire, she saw now and hesitated. But he was well dressed and pleasant-faced as he bent over to light his cigarette from the fire and put on more wood. As he straightened, he caught sight of her from the corner of his eye, and jerked around in surprise. "Hello, there," he called uncertainly, staring at her doubtfully. But her large gray eyes, contrasting with the white face, must have been reassuring, for he motioned her forward. "Care to join me?"

"Please, yes. . . . I hope you don't mind." She shouldn't be here, talking to a strange man, but until the vanished thread of memory returned, there was little else to do. "It was so dark and cold out there, alone, and I saw your fire. I'll go away, if you wish."

He smiled quickly at that. "No, glad to have you. Coffee? There. Afraid the rock is the best seat I can offer you." As she settled down beside the fire, he smiled again, and she was no longer afraid of him; only of the dark outside the rim of light thrown by the fire. Then, suddenly he frowned. "How'd you get in here? I thought the police were guarding the whole place."

"Were they? I didn't know. Nobody stopped me. . . . And how'd you get here, then?"

"Oh, they know I'm here; got a permit from the captain to stay here and see what happens for my newspaper—the Kendicon *Daily Leader*. I'm Harry Chapman, Miss—"

"Ann Muller."

"Hm-m-m. Well, anyway, White, the editor, sent me down here. We couldn't find any trace or clue of the heads that have been missing, so he figured it would at least make a good suspense story, and might even trap the maniac who's responsible." At her uncertain look, he stopped. "You knew about the missing heads, didn't you?"

Was she supposed to? There was something vaguely familiar about it, but nothing clear. "No."

"Don't read the papers, eh? Well, briefly it's like this. Every week, for the past four weeks, there's been a man killed here. Every Saturday morning the police find a body—but no head. They've hunted for the missing heads, but there's not even a speck of blood left to show where they went. Either some maniac's loose here, or there's black magic—which we don't believe. But nobody can find any traces."

ANN NODDED, poking at the fire with a stick, and only half listening. "I must have heard something about it, I guess, but not much. What happened?"

"That's the catch; nobody knows. The first three were bums, probably just hiding out here for the night, but the third was Dean Mallory . . . had an orchestra playing at the Dug-out. At a guess, I'd say he stumbled in here looking for atmosphere for a modern thing he was writing, and it got him. His head was sheared off as clean as a cut of meat from the butchers. . . . Hope I'm not frightening you?"

"No." Whatever reaction came to her from Chapman's words, it wasn't

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fear, though there had been a tinge of fright since the moment when she first noticed the park about her. Her eyes wandered out into the shadows and back to him quickly. "They think it's a maniac?"

"All except a drunken old fortune teller named Olga. She's been pestering the police sergeant with tales of the supernatural. Claims it's a nis. And I think he about half believes her, judging by the stress he lays on the absence of rats from the ruins, and the cross he made me wear around my neck." Harry tapped his shirt to indicate the faint bulge of the tiny object. "You know, it's lucky you found me; running around alone here might be bad. More coffee?"

"No, thanks." Funny the way the flickering light on his face made it seem quixotical and boyish. Ann slipped closer to him. "What's a nis, some kind of an evil ghost? I . . . I've heard the name somewhere, I think."

"Hm-m-m. I had to look it up in a book." He bit off the corner of a cigarette package, pulled one out, and lighted it without disturbing the arm on the stones behind her. Where his fingers touched her back, little dancing tingles went tripping up as he continued. "Seems a nis is someone who was too interested in life and too contrary to die, so he turns into a half-demon, decides on what he wants to do and does it, not bothering about normal men any more. According to the book, there used to be one who stole colors from living people to paint his pictures, leaving them with eyes black as a stoat's and hair like the feathers of a crow. But nisses can't stand sunlight, so it killed him when he tried to steal the colors from the sunset."

Ann stirred restlessly. "Good always triumphs in the stories, doesn't it? And I think you used the wrong plural."

"Probably. There's another story with a somewhat neater ending, if you'd care to hear it. . . . Hm-m-m. One of them took up lodging in a valley hidden from civilization and went about building up a choir. He swiped the voices from all the yokels around, and played on them like an organ, thundering his music down from the hills in a great symphony. Naturally, without voices, the people were struck dumb. Then word got out, and musicians began stemming in from the far corners of the earth to listen. But so many who came left their voices behind in the valley, that in time they stopped coming, and even the location of the valley was lost to man's memory."

"Rather horrible, those legends, aren't they?" She stretched out suddenly and got to her feet, restlessness stirring in her. "Let's go somewhere to a show; I'll pay my way. At least, it's more cheerful than sitting out here all night."

Harry glanced at his watch. "It's rather late. What show'd you have in mind?"

"Apollo, I guess." What other show would they see, with the Apollo only a few yards away, across the park? There was no point to going clear across town to another. "Just cheap vaudeville, of course, but better than usual this week; at least everybody says so."

CHAPMAN made no comment, but came to his feet quickly, one hand sliding back to his pocket and clutching at something there; in the flickering light, it looked like the handle of a gun. His actions were suddenly unfriendly and odd. She turned at his motion, leading the way, and he followed a few feet behind. She could feel his eyes riveted on the nape of her neck, and hear him muttering something that sounded suspi-

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ciously like "maniac," but she shook her head and stopped puzzling about it, leading toward the theater. From the dark ahead, a gurgling ululation sounded. There was something about it—where had she heard that before?

"Lord!" Harry's gasp behind her cut through her thoughts and brought them back to him. "Look! It's there!"

His fingers were pointing ahead to the building that reared up from the tangled ground, its marquee blazing with light, announcing the stellar attraction of "Loto, the Incomparable." The lights spelled out Apollo Theater in no uncertain letters.

"Of course it's there. What did you expect?" His odd surprise was amusing, though it annoyed her a little. "Shall we go in?"

"Listen, I may be crazy, but O'Halloran and I went over the grounds this morning, and it wasn't there then. I even dug part of that sign out of the wreckage. There hasn't been an Apollo Theater for forty years. You'll be telling me next I'm the head-hunting maniac." He stared about hastily, and his fingers clutched more tightly on the object in his pocket. "What's the game?"

He was being silly about something. Perhaps it would be best to forget about taking him in, she thought, then felt a pressing urgency to have him accompany her. "It's always been there, Harry," she assured him soothingly. "You must have been imagining things by the fire; people do that sometimes."

"Hm-m-m! All right, I'm crazy . . . I must be, unless I'm asleep 'by the fire.' O. K., in we go. This wouldn't make good copy, but it may be interesting—maybe." He strode forward grimly, glancing back at her once as if expecting her to be gone. She smiled at him, but there was no lightening of his face.

Suppose he was right? He seemed so positive, and there were alarming gaps in her memory. Something had happened before she found herself in the park, but she could recall none of it. And this building, standing in the wilderness about, didn't make sense. She glanced at the sign again, studying the billing. "Loto, the Incomparable." Who and what was Loto? Harry was back at her side then, and she clutched at his arm.

"Let's not go in; I've changed my mind. There's something wrong here, I can feel it."

"You're darned right there is. They aren't charging amusement tax, for one thing. Still trying to tell me I'm crazy?"

"I don't know . . . I can't remember what I should about all this; there's a blank in my head."

"Hm-m-m. You're a queer kid, Ann, and I should take you to O'Halloran, but I'm going to trust you instead. Maybe there's a cog slipped in your memory—amnesia; we'll see about it later." He took her hand, and the friendliness she wanted from him was back, though determination pulled his face in stern lines. "Come on, we're in this now, and whateyer it is, I'm seeing it through. It wouldn't surprise me to find the missing heads somewhere at the bottom of it. Game to try it?"

ANN TOSSED her head, though a prickling of her skin seemed like a warning, and they passed into the lobby. There was a moldy smell in the air, and a look of cheap opulence to the place that dated it. The unsmiling usher greeted them, his face masked in shadows, and led them down the middle aisle and to fancy plush-covered seats at the edge. The place was dimly lighted, probably by gas lamps, and the shadows

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spewed over the audience and up to the stage, which stood out in a contrasting glare of brilliance, though the curtain was still down. The musty odor was stronger, and the hissing buzz of the audience already seated carried a note that was half familiar, but entirely unpleasant.

Harry nudged her. "Notice anything queer about the audience? No? Well, try and pick out any details. All I can see are dark blobs. I can't focus on them—might as well be a veil over the whole place—and I don't like it, Ann. Maybe you shouldn't be here."

"*Shh.* I'm here now." She caught his hand. It was nice to be worried over. Whatever her past, she was sure there had been too little of that. "Curtain's going up."

"Yeah."

There was a fanfare from the orchestra pit and a blurred announcement from the stage, followed by a quartet, all with long mustaches and dressed in tight pants, who came out and sang sentimental ballads, ending on the sad song of "Nelly, the Bartender's Daughter," unexpurgated. Ann had the impression that it was old to her, even the disgust at the cheap words. Harry grunted, but said nothing.

A team doing stunts on roller skates to jingling ragtime came next, followed by a man who juggled little balls that looked like glass eyes. Ann was still puzzling over the feeling of familiarity with the acts. Harry sat with his eyes glued on the stage, and his nerves sticking out all over. A hush settled over the audience, and the stage lights cut to a center spot, coming from the wings, and leaving two lanes of black around the lighted section.

Off stage a ratty voice announced the main feature with unctuous pride. "The Great Loto, with his Carillon of Skulls, the Delight of the Crowned Heads of Europe, in Person. Rasputin himself was proud to honor the art of the Incomparable Loto, Ladeezngents, who now brings you a new and hitherto unplayed symphony of his own composition. I give you—Loto!"

A full roll from the drums brought Loto out, dressed like a clown, and carrying a large covered object that must surely be his instrument. But his chalk-white face and long, red mouth were entirely unfunny, and the tapering fingers on his hands might have belonged to an Inca priest, adept at tearing the living heart out of a sacrifice. When he removed the covering from his instrument, it was revealed to be in truth a long line of skulls, suspended from a shining bar by small chains. The effect was appalling, and a low shudder of expectancy ran through the audience.

Loto was a good showman; the skulls went into the lane of light, so that attention was focused on them and his fingers, which held two small hammers shaped at the ends like teeth. The rest of him was shrouded in shadow, except for the thin white oval of his face. Harry twisted in his seat and caught at Ann's shoulder.

"Third skull from the end!" His breath came whistling between his teeth, harsh against her ear. "Notice the bulge over the eyesockets. If it didn't belong to Dean Mallory, I'll eat it!"

ANN LOOKED, and sickness swept over her as something in her head snapped. She remembered noticing—long ago, it seemed—how Mallory's brow bulged out, and now she saw the same on the skull. So that was what *he* wanted! And now, under his command of the night, shrouded in forgetfulness, she had brought another.

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"Harry!" She fought down her qualms and forced out the words. "Now I remember. We've—"

"Hush, he's starting. I've got to think this out." His arm on her shoulder held her down, and the weakness that had engulfed her kept her from throwing it aside. She turned her eyes numbly on the stage, and the first of Loto's music clamped her down completely, leaving only numbness and fear.

Loto was swaying back and forth in the semidarkness behind the skulls, tapping out the notes as on a xylophone. Mostly they were in a minor key, but interwoven with majors in a fashion both fascinating and horrible. This piece was worse than the others she had heard; it should never have been written, but it fitted the instrument, and there was a frightful personality to each individual tone that seemed to rouse the audience to a frenzy. Loto ran down to a long wail and began developing a rising crescendo, going higher and higher until the air seemed to shriek under the torture of the impact.

Suddenly he stopped with one hammer in the air above his head, needing still one savage higher note to complete it; but the last skull was missing. The chain which should have held it dangled there, but there was only a screw and a small shred of bone left. A sigh welled up from the audience, and Loto turned to face them, his hammer still in the air. Slowly his feral eyes swung over the rows of seats, lingering just a moment on each, while he seemed to study.

Ann shuddered, knowing what was to come and powerless to stop it as the eyes swung slowly over the seats toward them. Harry was staring toward the stage, too tense to notice her efforts to attract his attention. Then Loto's eyes found them and lingered, swept sideways, up and down, and came back to Harry. He nodded, lowered his hammer softly, and strode firmly down the steps into the orchestra pit, while the whole audience swung to keep their eyes on him.

Then her hand slid over the beads on her bag and sudden hope shocked her back to control. It would not be this time! Not this man! She dug her fingers into Harry's arm, tightening her grip until he jerked around. "Quick, before he reaches you. If I help now, will you help me later?"

"Of course," he answered, still studying Loto from the corner of his eyes. "But I can take care of Loto. I'm armed."

She shook her head urgently. "No, you mustn't. The others had guns and knives. Here, take my bag—here! Breathe some of the balsam needle dust into your nose like snuff and throw the

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rest toward Loto. Meet me the same place tomorrow night . . . now, quickly!"

Would he never take it! His hand hovered halfway between the useless gun and the bag while his eyes shuttled uncertainly to her, back to Loto, and then to the purse. But some of her sincerity must have impressed him, for he finally reached out impulsively and opened the bag. Loto was at the row in which they sat as he breathed in on the dust, and tossed a handful toward the advancing figure.

There was a strangled sound as it spread out in the musty air, and all the blurred outlines wavered. Ann felt something catch at her breath and go stinging down into her lungs. She crumpled down and lost consciousness with a tired little sigh of satisfaction; tonight there would be no headless corpse in Lefferts Park.

WITH the contrariness of nature, there was a glorious moon the next night, but Ann was in no mood to appreciate it. *He* had not appeared, and she wondered why, unless the effects of the night before were still on him. Surely he must have seen that it was her bag the balsam dust came from, and he was not the forgiving kind. But she was too tired to care much.

What had Harry thought, and would he keep his appointment? Once, years before, there had been another—but that was the past. The Apollo was only a weed-grown basement tonight, but she gave it a wide berth; there was no way of telling where *he* might be hiding. Then a faint smell of smoke reached her, and she half smiled and quickened her pace a little. Harry had remembered.

"*Hss!* Annie, lass!" It was Madame Olga's voice, and Ann stopped to let the hobbling figure catch up with her. "Och, now, I've been chasing you all over the place, I have. I've almost run the legs off my poor old body, dearie."

Half annoyed, Ann waited until the old crone caught her breath. "What is it, Mother Brian?"

"Hee! I'm a fool, dearie—a fool, no-less—poking my nose where it's no business a-being. But I looked in on you last night, and a rare sight it was, seeing *him* get the surprise he did. A-standing there on them old stones, making noises fit for the Old One, while the two of you sat like ones bewitched on the dirty old wall. Though I'm sorry you learned of the things he'd have you do; 'twas ever my thought that you'd best never find that out."

She thrust a dirty paper sack into Ann's hands. "Your young man forgot them, and O'Halloran—the dumb Mick—never saw a thing but the lad a-sleeping in the ruins. Most smart and proper was the tongue-lashing he gave the boy, too. Hee! You'll find your bag, your bullet . . . which'll fit; I tried it . . . and his gun there in the bag. I was after them as soon as the sun upped in the early morning."

"Thank you, Mother Brian. You're kind." The girl fiddled uncomfortably with the sack, and stared out toward the source of the smoke. Madame Olga cackled.

"All right, be off with you, dearie, since you're wanting the sight of him. But keep the two ears of you open. I had out the cards this day, and I read things in them that'll surprise you, mayhap."

She chuckled again and made off quickly before Ann could ask what the surprises were. But the girl wasted no time in wondering. Tueking the bag under her arm, she moved forward to

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ward Harry's fire, hastily inserting the cartridge Madame Olga had made into the gun. Unless her plans went wrong, another morning should find release for her. Then, as she neared the fire, she caught the rich voice of O'Halloran and saw two bulky figures beside that of the reporter. Moving soundlessly, she slid into the shelter of a tangle of scrub growth and waited.

"Kept thinking I'd heard the name," O'Halloran was saying, "though where you heard it, devil knows. But sure enough, this morning it come to me. Used to be a girl by that name poking around here, looking for something; claimed she was busy about historical research or something. But that was twenty, twenty-five years ago, and never a word has been heard of her since; disappeared all of a sudden, like she came. Little, dark, queer thing she was."

Harry nodded vaguely. "Probably not the person I'm thinking of, though it fits. . . . I still think the center of what's going on here is the Apollo."

"Might be. I grew up hereabouts, lad, and there was ever men—strong, brave, God-fearing men they was, too—who'd have devil a thing to do with the place, even in broad daylight. Sure, being a kid, I wanted to see for myself, what with the skating rink and all that, but I was never allowed it. Well, don't be dreaming again this night, lad. Come on, MacDougall, we belong outside."

"Aye." They lumbered off, flashing their lights about nervously.

Ann waited a few minutes more, while Harry glanced at his watch and fidgeted on the rough stone seat; then slipped out of her concealment and was beside him before he realized his waiting was over.

"So I didn't dream up this date, then?" For a man of almost thirty, the embarrassment on his face was almost too boyish, but Ann decided it was charming in a way. He suffered from another case of acute fidgets before he went on. "Look, Ann, I feel like a heel for going to sleep on you last night. Darn fool stunt, and I can't even remember when it happened."

"Sleep?"

"Hm-m-m. Right after I finished the nis yarn, I guess . . . wasn't it? *Ugh,* and what nightmares I had. Walking around in my sleep and letting O'Halloran find me in the ex-Apollo!" He grimaced sheepishly. "If I hadn't found your footprints around here, I'd have thought the whole thing was imagination. When did you leave?"

THE TEMPTATION to continue the pretense of his sleeping was almost overpowering, but cold logic choked back the impulse, even as she started to follow it. *He* was still somewhere near, and there was no time for small talk. "After you threw the dust," she answered, holding out the automatic to him. "Here, Mo . . . Madame Olga found this and sent it to you."

"After I—" He disregarded the gun, his face freezing into a tight mask of suspicion. "That's ridiculous! I looked over the Apollo as soon as O'Halloran woke me, and it's in ruins. What's the game?"

"Only the truth, Harry. Would I remember your dreams—the dust, the carillon, how you were unable to see the audience clearly? You saw the Apollo through my eyes, and I'm. . . . But you promised to help me."

He nodded reluctantly, only partially convinced. "If it's true, I did. But . . . Hell, what is it you want?"

Ann held out the gun again, trem-

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bling a little, now that the moment had actually come. The carefully rehearsed explanation she had planned in advance left her now and she stumbled for words. And from across the park, a quavering shriek keened out, warning her there was no time to waste.

"Well?" Chapman's voice was impatient.

"There's a silver bullet in it now," she began, and hesitated. Then, because she could find no other way, she blurted it out in a rush. This acting as a lure under temporary forgetfulness must stop, and there was no other escape. "I want you to use it on me, Harry! It . . . oh, I can't explain it, but you must. You promised!"

Blankness crowded the grimness and suspicion from his face, only to vanish abruptly. He grabbed her shoulder and began shaking it, shouting at her. "Ann, are you crazy? Of all the damned nonsense! Put up that gun. And if you try to use it yourself, I'll spank you—soundly!"

So she had failed; the human taboos she had almost forgotten were stronger than his promise. But it had seemed so right, so obvious to her! Wearily she slipped from him and back toward the tangled hinterland. "All right. I can't use it anyway; that's part of *his* commands. Good night, Harry."

"Wait. No, you don't!" One of his arms caught her as she turned and swung her back. "You're going to explain this mess before you go. And whose commands are you talking about?"

Her futile struggles against him were cut short as a voice oozed out of the shadows behind them. Still dressed in his clown's clothing, Loto slipped out from a clump of weeds. "I believe," he said unctuously, "that I am the one she refers to. I'm her master, even when she tries to disobey me." He was rubbing his hooked fingers over the edge of a curved saber and there was a sickly grin on his chalky face. "Ah, what a lovely skull shape, man-thing. I admire it."

Ann saw Harry tense for a spring as Loto lifted the heavy blade and knew he could never make it. Up went the blade, twisting a little, curved in the air, and started down! Then the scream that had been stuck in her throat ripped out, and she felt one of her hands, still clutching the gun, go up to knock against the blade just as Harry began his leap. But the saber continued down. She heard it thwack as it struck and saw Harry crumple into a heap. Loto moved forward.

"Stop!" Her throat was frozen shut so that the word was only a whisper, but Loto heard it and paused.

His voice was filled with furious arrogance. "You dare! One side, wench! You've been useful, but this is too much for my patience. Drop that harmless toy and leave me!"

"The harmless toy," she warned him quietly, "is loaded with a silver bullet."

Loto checked himself. "Silver! You fool, you little fool! If you dared to use it, you couldn't go back to your place without me, and the morning would find you here. You know what that means?"

"Death, I suppose, when the sunlight touches me."

"Death!" He wrenched out the word and started forward again. "And an unpleasant one, I assure you. Give me that gun."

As he reached for it, her fingers seemed to contract of their own volition, and the automatic coughed once. Disbelief flickered over Loto's face. He threw out one arm, easing slowly to the

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ground, his eyes boring into her. "You . . . you love the man; I should have known."

Blood was trickling from his mouth, and he coughed his throat clear, forcing himself half erect. "Then, Ann Muller, I give back your womanhood before I . . . die. I revoke the curse. And the man-thing . . . is stunned . . . no more. You—" Something that was either a smile or a sneer slit his thin mouth and was replaced by horror as he pitched forward limply.

ANN STUMBLED back into the shadow of a tree. The curse was gone, as Loto had said—she had felt the change as he spoke; but the picture of him softening under the shadow of death was too much for her to grasp.

"Harry!" she called, wondering fearfully whether the last words had been truthful.

They had. Harry was coming toward her as she turned, rubbing his temples. "It's all right, Ann. Only the flat of the blade, thanks to you. I came to just as you shot and heard the rest."

"Then you know?"

"Hush, it doesn't matter now. We'll forget all this nightmare." Faintly in the darkness she saw his eyes smiling down at her, and a glow swept up and enveloped her like a soft wind. "But O'Halloran must have heard the shot and he can't find you here—too hard to explain. Know some place to hide?"

"There's an old hidden tunnel near the Apollo."

"Good. I'll tell O'Halloran I shot the maniac and phone the paper. Then"—his lips brushed lightly across her forehead and he turned her around and pushed her gently away—"when it's safe, I'll find you. Now, off with you."

Somehow her feet found their way through the tangle, but her thoughts were dancing on ahead, no longer bothered by Loto's strange reversal of manner or the quick telescoping of events. Ahead, the Apollo loomed up, its naked ruins now nothing but a monument to a dead past, and behind the wind brought

the faint sounds of excited voices. She stopped beside the old oak, caressing its wrinkled bark, then turned toward the tunnel, slowly, as the emotions denied her so long pulsed hotly through her. So intent on them was she that she almost tripped over a dim-burning lantern before she noticed Madame Olga squatting in the tunnel.

"Mother Brian—"

"I know, dearie." The seeress rose

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slowly to her feet, her eyes on the rotten door that covered the entrance. "I heard, and 'twas a good thing to see him a-dying, may the Old One carry his foul soul away!"

"Shh!" Ann couldn't hate him now, not with the curse so newly gone from her. "Mother Brian, I'm a woman again! A woman!"

"That I know, too, and the words you've been hearing from the boy. But did the lad see your face . . . did he that, Annie child?"

"I don't suppose so; we were in the shadows. But what's wrong with that?" In the old woman's eyes there was a glint of tears before they dropped again, and something that sent a cold lance of fear down her back. Ann clutched at the bent shoulders. "Mother Brian, is there—? There's nothing wrong? There can't be!"

For answer, the crooked old fingers groped in a dirty bag and came out with a broken mirror. "When you've done with it, I'll be waiting at the other end," Madame Olga said gently. "Don't be waiting too long."

She went hobbling off hastily and Ann raised the mirror, studying it with dawning comprehension. There had been no kindness in Loto's last gesture! Even dying, he had planned that time, held in abeyance during the years his trickery had held her, should finally catch up with her. And Harry! But he was young enough to forget, though he might wonder for a time.

The cracked mirror slipped from her fingers and shattered on the floor, its work finished. Then, with a low moan, she turned slowly down the tunnel, away from all she wanted in life. For the face in the mirror had been that of a woman of fifty, without even a trace of youthfulness to match her unchanged emotions.

THE END.

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OSCAR

by CLEVE CARTMILL

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Illustrated by Edd Cartier

PAUL ROCKEY parked his roadster in front of the beer joint.

"She lives in that corner apartment house," he said. "We'll meet here, after."

"I'd like to raise an objection," Michael Corbyn said.

Terence Finnegan and Paul Rockey regarded Corbyn with patient annoyance. Corbyn's lean face flushed.

"My objection is valid," he protested. "Suppose this girl goes nuts. We'd be in a hell of a jam."

Terence Finnegan laid a large fatherly hand on Corbyn's shoulder.

"Mike, my son, we rehearsed for two hours with Elsie. Did she turn a hair? No. Nor will this friend of Paul's."

"Elsie is a tailor's dummy."

"Aren't all women?"

"Don't be so glib, Terry. I contend it's dangerous. According to Paul, this

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girl has occult leanings. She wants to believe in such phenomena as our imaginary Oscar. If we play our parts well enough, I tell you we're not running a risk."

"I'm not as concerned for Linda's sanity," Paul Rockey interposed, "as I am about your acting."

"O. K. Let's go."

In the third floor corridor of the apartment building, Paul Rockey rapped on a door. It was presently opened by a pretty brunette in blue slacks.

"Oh, good," she said. "Company."

The three young men trooped inside. Paul Rockey made a vague motion toward his companions.

"Linda, may I present Terry Finnegan, and—"

He broke off. Michael Corbyn was following an unseen something around the walls with cold, blue eyes.

Rockey cleared his throat. "Ah, er, Mike."

Corbyn started. "Sorry," he murmured to the girl. "How do you do?"

"—and Michael Corbyn. Linda Houseman."

Finnegan closed the door. He and Rockey exchanged a significant glance, turned compassionate eyes on Corbyn, shook their heads in brief pity. Linda, observing the by-play, frowned fleetingly and motioned them to chairs.

"Would you like a whiskey and soda?"

Three contented sighs were born.

As ICE tinkled in the kitchen, Corbyn asked a question with his eyebrows. Two nods of affirmation answered him.

Linda brought a tray of drinks, tucked a leg under her on a divan, and raised her glass.

"Do we drink to something, or do we just drink?"

"To our beautiful barmaid," Corbyn responded. "My father told me only last week—"

"Last night you said he was killed in the Big Wind of 1906," Rockey interrupted.

"That wasn't the blow that killed father. He told me only last week that brunettes, as compared to blondes—"

He halted. Again his eyes followed an Unseen Something across the walls.

Rockey and Finnegan dropped embarrassed glances to their drinks.

Rockey made a hollow effort to break the tension. "What have you been doing lately, Linda?"

She, intent upon Corbyn, did not heed the question. Finnegan nodded at Rockey.

"He's got it again," Rockey said in disgust.

"Mike!" Finnegan snapped.

Corbyn jumped. Like a man awakening from heavy sleep, he blinked and gradually orientated himself.

"As I was saying," he mumbled, ". . . where was I?"

"I think we'd better explain," Rockey said to the wide-eyed Linda. "Mike thinks he's a psychic phenomenon. He has a familiar spirit, who, in a spirit of familiarity, he calls Oscar."

"Nuts!" Finnegan snorted. "There's nothing the matter with him, except he's crazy."

"He sees a Thing," Rockey continued smoothly. "It follows him. He can't or won't, describe it. It is not always visible. He sees it, or claims he does, only on some nights in an inclosure . . . a room, auditorium, or a similar place. It never manifests itself in daylight. Don't feel ill at ease. It never bothers anybody. Terry and I don't pay attention to it any more."

"All we can do," Finnegan added,

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"is apologize for him. Of course, this peculiarity of his distracts attention from some of his more obvious defects, and people get the impression that he's a pretty nice guy except for his fixation."

MICHAEL CORBYN watched Linda narrowly during the conversation. When she looked at him, he spoke confidentially.

"I feel that we are kindred spirits, Miss Houseman. We know that forces, Beings, exist that cannot be explained in terms familiar to such clods as my friends. But you and I, and others like us . . . we know."

Linda's lips were parted, her forgotten drink clutched in both hands.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes."

"Don't let him sell *you* on it, Miss Houseman," Finnegan said. "And drink your drink before it gets warm."

"Let's talk of something else," Rockey proposed. "If Mike gets started, he'll talk all night on other-plane Beings. I remember one drunk and stormy night—"

His voice died. His jaw dropped. His eyes, as Corbyn's had, followed an unseen Something along the base of a wall. He became rigid.

"What is this, a gag?" Finnegan snarled.

Corbyn flung him a smug and sardonic look. Linda's wide, dark eyes moved slowly from one to the other. With a slight shudder, she set aside her drink.

Rockey, in the manner of a sleep walker, set down his drink and walked stiffly from the apartment without a glance at Linda or a word of farewell.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Finnegan snapped. "Where you going?"

After the door had closed behind Rockey, the three sat quietly. Corbyn's lips formed a faint smile. Finnegan gulped the last of his drink and set the glass on the floor. Linda's glance moved fearfully about the room, questing, searching each corner.

"This is a lot of nonsense!" Finnegan growled.

"Be a good boy, Oscar," Corbyn tossed over his shoulder at an empty corner.

"It's gone far enough," Finnegan continued. "I never told you before, Mike, but I think this is just a pose on your part to get attention. you wouldn't receive otherwise because of a colorless and stupid nature. I'll grant that the accumulated effect of these painful incidents might persuade a weak-minded visionary like Paul that he saw something for a moment. Your low cunning broke through for an instant. Well, I resent this pose of yours, and you either drop it or I don't want your friendship." He paused. "May I have another drink, Miss Houseman?"

Linda took his glass solemnly and went into the kitchen. Corbyn and Finnegan grinned at each other.

WHEN Linda came into the room again Finnegan smiled his thanks for the fresh drink and continued, directing his remarks at the girl. "Hope you'll excuse my vehemence, but I'm fed up with this gag. I don't like to be made feel a fool, and when Paul walked out of here like a corpse, it was embarrassing. If he had brains enough to come in out of an air raid, he'd have known he didn't see anything; he only thought he did. Mike doesn't see anything, either. He—"

Finnegan gasped. His eyes froze on Something in the kitchen doorway.

Corbyn turned lazily, looked toward

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the kitchen, and shrugged. Linda put a taut hand to her throat.

Finnegan got stiffly to his feet. With the glass still in his hand, he backed to the door. He reached behind him, opened it and backed into the hallway, his eyes still riveted on the kitchen entrance.

When the door closed, and the sound of his footsteps receded, Corbyn looked at his watch.

"Now we are alone with it," he said in sepulchral tones. "In five minutes it will be midnight, the end of an old day. This is the first time anyone else has ever seen Oscar. Perhaps that is an omen." He mused silently for a second. "Perhaps . . . this time . . . it won't follow me out."

"No . . . no!" Linda whimpered as he rose.

A strangling scream gurgled in her throat as she fastened her eyes on the kitchen doorway. Corbyn followed her glance. The short hairs on his neck stiffened, and a chill fluttered down his spine.

In the kitchen doorway squatted a dark Thing. It had two living snakes for arms, and a large green eye.

"Well?" it snarled in a hoarse voice. "Well?"

THE END.

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THE PROFESSOR'S HOBBY

by ROBERT ARTHUR

He had an interesting hobby, the town thought. He did have an interesting hobby—but it was not at all what the town thought it was!

Illustrated by Schneeman

THE finding of the child's body, and the coroner's report, wound up the story. Little Alice Jeans had been gone four days, and during those ninety-six hectic hours, half the population of the county had abandoned its work and its play to hunt for her.

But when a State trooper, casting over some cut-over ground near an old gravel pit with a highly trained police dog to aid him, found her white and wasted body, there was nothing to do but to go back to work. Alice had been only five. Most of the searchers had been prepared in advance for the tragic termination of the search. It was unlikely in the extreme that she should survive four days in the open, alone, without food, especially when one of those days had been storm-racked and lightning-torn.

So the coroner's report—"dead of exposure and loss of blood"—satisfied everyone, even the almost, but not completely, disconsolate parents, who had eight other children and had rather enjoyed their momentary notoriety. Everyone but Dale—Jonas Dale—special events man for the New York *Daily Clarion*.

He had an idea. An idea that was screwy, wacky, as nutty as a bag full of cashews. But an idea that would make a story. And what a story! But could he make it prove up? Could he get a shred of evidence that it *might* have happened? The *Clarion* liked its meat red, and its contents were like a rubber band, they would stretch to cover almost anything.

Jonas Dale's pale-blue eyes actually took on warmth as he visualized the headlines and text. His beaked, ugly nose, which more than once had gotten him called a "bloody bird of prey" by viciously angered individuals whom his combination of intuition, genuine reportorial ability, and unscrupulous skill at coloring facts had raised to national notoriety, twitched faintly. His large, bony hands dry-washed each other. He was already writing the story in his mind.

And as yet, with no more to go on than the fact that this upstate New York county was a hotbed of superstition, that thousands of acres of it were gloomy, barren cut-over land on which nothing more than scrub timber and brush grew, and into which human beings sometimes did not penetrate from year's end to year's end—and that coroner's report.

That coroner's report which said, "died of exposure and *loss of blood*."

Loss of blood! Funny no one else had made anything of that, had thought it amiss. How had little Alice Jeans lost blood? Oh, she was scratched up, sure. Bruised, too, where she had fallen on sharp rocks—hands, face, knees, legs and feet—but nothing so serious as to

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"My Imp," smiled the professor. "He's very useful?"

cause more than a normal childish bleeding. Unless those two tiny bluish holes in her throat—

Jonas Dale's eyes gleamed brighter, and his hands made a little slithering sound as he dry-washed them now. Those two little blue holes—something else no one had noticed—at the base of her throat, just above the jugular vein. The holes were close beside a scratch from a berry vine, and probably not noticed on that account. Certainly given no attention by the county coroner, but given attention by Jonas Dale. Photo-

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graphed by him, several times, with a pocket camera having an expensive close-up lens. Printed and enlarged, they would stand out boldly even in a newspaper reproduction—touched up as they'd be by the art department, of course, with a little white arrow pointing to them. And a big, white question mark framing the whole picture of little Alice Jeans just as she had been found, crumpled at the base of a white rock, close beside a tangle of berry bushes, with the padmarks of the police dog leading up to her and the dog itself standing beyond her, howling at the sky to bring the State trooper, one of his masters—

At that point, Jonas Dale had a thought, and in following it up, turned out his collection of prints that a local photo shop had made up for him.

He riffled through them, finally brought out three that showed the body, and the surrounding ground. Two of these he discarded. The third he stared at for a long minute. It was too much to hope for, yet—

To be honest, he couldn't swear that slight mark close to the corner, that indentation in a patch of soft earth some four feet from the child, was a padmark. It certainly wasn't a padmark of the dog, for the canine's trail, in that storm-wet earth, led straight to the body, then around it, where the beast had moved to sit down and howl until the trooper came. No, the mark hadn't been left by the dog.

Of course, it might not be anything but a natural mark resulting from the drip of water off the bushes, or it might have been made by a rolling stone, but touched up, just a little bit, it could certainly be made to look like a padmark.

And if it wasn't the padmark of a dog, what creature had left it?

Jonas Dale visualized that question, in screaming black letterpress, underneath the photo, in a two-page center-spread in the Sunday edition. And a little chill, like a centipede with frigid feet, crawled down the base of his spine. The words that were forming in his mind, the sentences that were coming together with electric agility, were so plausible that he had almost convinced himself.

But the chill brought him back to normal. When he realized that he was even frightening himself, he grinned. This was going to be one of his masterpieces. It would mean a bonus, and a week's vacation at least. Also, he could make it cover another two days here, loafing and getting pleasantly tight at night in the local inn, plus a fairly heavy load on his expense account. But it wouldn't do for him to go forgetting that he was building up a sensational screamer of a feature story out of the whole cloth. For a minute and a half there he'd found himself really convinced he had something, and that was the old bushwa.

Jonas Dale put away the photos, took a long drink from a bottle of Scotch in his suitcase, and then set out to get the little extra he'd need to convert his imaginings into the reality of hot print.

And his search led him directly to the pleasant, middle-class home of Professor Burton Leem.

BURTON LEEM was a professor of comparative religion in the small college which the town of Countyville boasted. Jonas Dale had never heard of him before, but as soon as he stated what he wanted—a book or two on witchcraft, and about werewolves in particular—Professor Leem entered his life.

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"Books about ghosts and vampires and things?" the stout bartender of the small inn where Jonas Dale had stopped for additional refreshment, exclaimed. "Laddie, the man you want is Prof Leem. Ho, ho, ha! Yessir! He's the man you're after, all right. This is Saturday afternoon, an' th' library's closed, but he'll have the book for you. He'll have the ghost, too!"

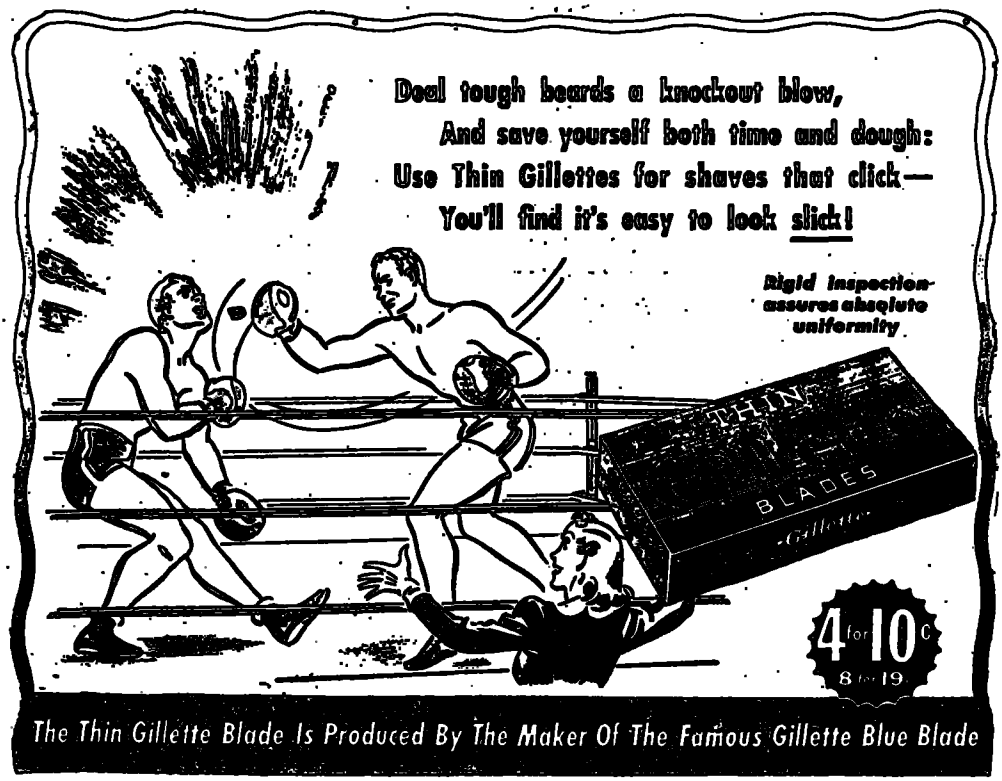
The barkeep's belly jiggled with deep, rumbling laughter. The round, red face screwed up until there were almost tears in the little, flesh-embedded eyes.

"Ho, ho, ha!" the bartender chuckled. "Ghosts! Yessir, Prof Leem is the man for you. He'll introduce you to 's many 's you want to meet. Give you a social knockdown to 'em. He collects 'em."

Jonas Dale choked on the last half ounce of Scotch, and reached for the chaser quickly. When he had gotten his wind pipe cleared, he ordered another double and demanded what the devil the bartender meant.

"Just what I said, laddie," the stout man chuckled. "No more, no less. Prof Leem collects ghosts. All kinds. I don't remember all their names, though he's told me. Yep. Vampires, spooks, demons, little men, elves, and I don't know what all. They're his hobby. Ho, ho, ha, ha! His hobby! Collecting ghosts!"

The heavy man behind the bar went off into additional uncontrollable guffawing. Jonas Dale's nose twitched. His news sense overcame his irritation. He drank the double Scotch, and a little gleam came into his eyes. Already his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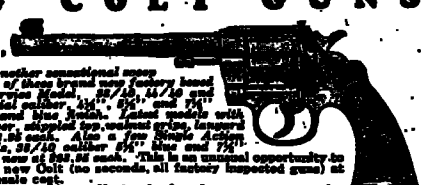

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busy mind was weaving Professor Burton Leem into the story he was going to write. A child killed maybe by a werewolf—that was the angle he was going to play up—and a professor who collected spooks! Holy smoke! A screwball, of course. Nutty as a peanut farm. Probably a publicity hound. An interview, pictures—

Then the barkeep got hold of himself and sobered down enough to explain, dashing Dale's newly aroused enthusiasm.

"You'll like the prof," he chuckled. "He's a card if there ever was one. What a joke! A regular guy, right down the line. You know there's a lot of talk in this county—hex stuff, and how to put the jinx on a guy, and stuff like that. The college is trying to get sense into the people around here. I'm not a native myself—I come from Brooklyn. And Prof Leem is doing his bit by kidding the pants off it. Whenever he runs into somebody who believes in that sort of bushwa, he tells 'em all about his collection of spooks, spirits, and elementals, as he calls 'em. He offers to take 'em to his home and show 'em his collection. Sometimes they go, and he shows 'em a lot of empty bottles, empty cages, and empty rooms, and with a dead pan on him like a judge, points out all the different haunts. Yes, sir, by name, with the gang outside waiting around and laughing fit to kill.

"Sometimes the prof comes in and gets a little tight—never drunk, just full of fun. Then he tells his story about a ghost named Mortimer, who got mixed up with a faun named Mildred, and what happened when her husband, who was a sat . . . sat—"

"Satyr?" Jonas Dale prompted.

"That's it, a satyr. A satyr named Melvin. Brother, if you never laughed in your life, you'll split wide open when

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Prof Leem tells how Mortimer the ghost went pale as a sheet—get it?—and his spirit quailed—get it? Honest, I never heard anything like it in my life."

"Another double—black and white," the reporter ordered. His brain was still humming over like a top. He was in his best form. Something big was going to come out of this—the biggest story he'd ever be connected with, he had a hunch.

So the prof was a kidder, huh? Went around laughing at the local superstitions. That meant he'd have to be handled differently. He could still be used, but in a different way. An interview in which he denounced the idea of little Alice Jeans being killed by a werewolf. Then get out and build up some local nitwits to making positive statements they'd seen a curious animal making off through the woods, night after night. Get the whole town on its ear—

The reporter got the whole layout worked out in his mind. He downed the Scotch absently. The barkeep had moved off to attend a couple who were necking in a secluded booth. Anyway, he'd told Dale everything he was good for, including the prof's address. Jonas Dale dropped a dollar on the bar and went out, his blood singing in his veins and feeling a friend to man, able to greet his bitterest enemy with a smile. This was going to be good!

THE HOUSE turned out to be on the outskirts of town, a big, rambling wooden structure dating from the seventies or eighties, when families had been larger. It was neatly painted, the grounds well kept, and looked quite normal and comfortable. No signs of a screwball owner in its exterior, Jonas Dale decided as he strode up a winding flagstone walk and knocked.

He whistled a little tune as he waited for the door to open. It was late afternoon, and the smell of honeysuckle was thick in the air. The Scotch he had drunk was working in him, and the world seemed a little remote, as if an unseen veil hung between him and it, since he had entered these grounds.

Scotch didn't usually affect him quite that way, but he didn't mind. He liked it. All sounds and scents came to him subdued, but his mind was still working with the sharp precision of a newly honed razor. He watched a small, stooped man in shabby work clothes push a lawn mower across an expanse of green sward a few yards away, and put the words together in his mind.

In the midst of this peaceful community, does an unknown horror lurk? A demonic horror at which men scoff and—

He'd gotten that far when the door swung open, and Jonas Dale got a faint thrill.

There was nobody there.

He stared, nose twitching, a little sobered, into the emptiness of a long hall, not dark and not light. Then comprehension came to him. The professor was a practical joker. The barkeep had told him that. He was putting over a gag on his caller. Remote control electrical opening mechanism.

As if corroborating his thought, a voice spoke—a pleasant, masculine voice.

"Please come in," it said. "My servant will show you the way. I'm in the library."

The voice obviously came from a small loudspeaker just over the door knocker, and Jonas Dale swallowed with something that was close to relief. That feeling was not much added to when he

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stepped into the hall and the door swung shut behind him, whereupon footsteps began to go *pad-pad-pad-pad* down the hall in front of him, each step being accompanied by a little scratching sound such as a dog's claws will make on a hardwood floor.

The footsteps preceded him down the hall and turned right at the end, leading him into a large, many-windowed room flooded with late afternoon sunlight. The shelves holding books ran up to the ceiling, and scuffed leather chairs were arranged about for the comfort of a reader. The scent of rich Havana smoke hung in the air.

Jonas Dale blinked. No, the guy wasn't a screwball. Maybe he liked eccentric practical jokes, such as having a radio speaker broadcast footsteps when nobody was there, to scare a timid visitor. But he had a good taste in cigars, and probably money, so—

THE REPORTER'S thoughts were checked by the appearance of Professor Burton Leem himself, from an elbow in the bookshelves. The professor was a tall man, rangy, his shoulders stooped by a sedentary desk life, but his face and forearms tanned—probably from regular exercise out on the tennis court Dale had glimpsed behind the house. His face was long, but not unpleasant. The grin and the handclasp he gave Dale were as friendly as a stranger could wish for.

"Good afternoon, sir," Professor Leem said, in a voice deep and vibrant, but not unduly loud. "I don't know why you're here, but you're welcome. Trust my servant didn't startle you. Togo sometimes does upset a visitor who isn't prepared for him."

"Togo?" Jonas Dale demanded. Then he relaxed and grinned. He wanted something from this guy, and when you wanted something from anyone, the best way to get it was to fall in with their humors. "Oh, you mean the footsteps. Ha, ha! Took me by surprise for a moment, until I caught on."

Professor Leem nodded.

"Togo is an elemental. From Japan. I decided if I were going to have an elemental for a butler, I should get one of suitable nationality. He was haunting a ruined Shintoist temple there when I ran across him, and I persuaded him to join me and come to America. He's really very efficient for the jobs to which he has been trained, although his intelligence is limited. Here he comes now, with the drinks."

Jonas Dale whirled, at the sound of those footsteps behind him. It was all right to take a joke but— Oh, well, if the fellow wanted to rig up the house with trick electric mechanisms and then tell him there were elementals around, that was all right. Part of the prof's line on the local yokelry. So he grinned again as a small wheeled bar swung into the room from the hall, advanced to them, and stopped.

The tall man lifted the lid and the reporter peered thirstily in at a glittering array of ancient bottles.

"Um," Professor Leem murmured absently. "I think—yes, it'll be just the thing. Do your like wine, Mr. . . . Mr.—"

"Dale," the reporter told him quickly. "Jonas Dale. Sorry I forgot to introduce myself. I came to get some dope from you, and to borrow a book or two—if I can. Local folk said you were the fellow who could help me. Wine? Sure."

Professor Leem held up a dusty bottle, crudely made, and looking old as the devil. He was measuring the con-

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tents with his eye, and ruefulness grew on his countenance.

"Have to send for more, I'm afraid," he murmured. "Isn't a drink left."

Dale made a deprecating sound.

"Please don't, on my account," he requested. "I can drink anything you've got. Or nothing, for that matter."

"Oh, no, no," Professor Burton Leem insisted. "Wouldn't think of it. Must have a drink. I especially want you to try this wine. Won't take three shakes of a cockatrice's tail, anyway. Give you a chance to see another of my servants at work, too."

He strode to his desk, picked up a small brass jar that was serving as a

paper weight, brought it back. It had the green patina of antiquity on it, and was curiously engraved. The cork was sealed in with wax, marked by a signet. With powerful fingers, Professor Leem proceeded to peel the wax off.

"This is where I have to keep my jinni, Slo." He gazed at Jonas Dale with a straight face. "*He* came out of the Mediterranean, where Suleyman chucked him and all his brothers, after he'd gotten them properly caged up. I picked him up cheap at a little bazaar in Constantinople. He's not easy to handle, but good for jobs like this."

Leem found a grip on the cork and pulled it free. Instantly smoke began to pour out of the jar. It rose upward, spinning as it did so, taking on the form of a whirling top that grew smaller and smaller until it settled to the rug and of a sudden, seemed to solidify into a small, pitch-black, sulky-appearing Senegambian in baggy trousers, pointed shoes with upturned toes, and a black turban.

Leem tapped the bottle in his hand. "Another," he ordered. "Nothing but the genuine Wine of the Prophet."

The Senegambian shook his head dolefully. "Boss," he said, in a broad Alabama accent, "I ain't sho'—"

"I have spoken!" Leem's tone became sharp. "Another bottle."

"But there's only six left," the dusky one—Jonas Dale, grinning, refused to call him a jinni, even mentally—protested. "And they are guarded by th' Immortal Worm. Also by—"

"Enough!" Leem clapped his hand sharply. "Go!"

The darky was gone!

JONAS DALE swallowed, and his grin had become a little fixed.

"Brother," he said, with an effort, "you've sure got something there."

Leem chuckled. "I taught him that accent myself," he informed the reporter. "It's a scream, isn't it? But I figured since he had to learn English anyway, he might as well sound like a conventional darky. Causes less comment that way."

His sentence was punctuated by the

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abrupt reappearance of the Senegambian in the middle of the rug. He'd probably come in from the hall, just as he'd popped out, when Jonas Dale's eyes were turned away. But he certainly appeared without any preliminaries. Now he held a bottle in his hand, dusty and moldy, and his black features were an ashen shade.

"Boss," he panted, "th' Worm most got me that time. I oney just—"

"Silence!" Professor Leem ordered, unmoved. "Time enough to worry when the Worm does get you. Now back into your home."

The dark one scowled, as if wishing to rebel. Then Leem made a pass with his hand, as though throwing a powder into the air. Instantly where the black man had been was nothing but smoke, and this smoke hissed toward the open brass jar, was sucked in as though by a powerful vacuum—operating through the desk, Jonas Dale guessed—whereupon Leem clapped the cork into place and quickly applied new wax from a drawer, impressing a seal with his signet ring.

"A copy of Suleyman's," he told Dale then, a shadow of regret on his face. "I know where I can pick up an original, but it hasn't been worth my while to do what will be necessary yet. This serves with rascals like Slo. Now for that drink."

He waved the reporter to a chair, pried the cork out with a penknife, and poured a generous draught of blood-red fluid into a goblet of spider-webbed glass which he took from the bar.

"Tickle your tonsils with this," he invited. "It's the McCoy. It's the wine that caused the Prophet to forbid liquor to all Mussulmen forever after. A girl with dark eyes gave him a bottle once, and he— But that's a long story. You'll like it."

The news hound liked it, all right. It went down like something alive and warm, slipping down his throat and leaving an electric feeling behind it. He knew you were supposed to sip fine wine, so he restrained his impulse to gulp it. But even the sips he took sent a glow radiating out from him, and his mind took on a crystalline clarity such as he had never quite attained to with Scotch.

Professor Leem settled back in an easy-chair opposite, crossed his long legs, and sipped with dreamy pleasure at his own goblet.

"To think there are only five bottles of this left in existence," he sighed. "I don't know what I'll do when this is gone. I really don't. But let's not mourn for the future, when we can be thankful for the present. By the way, I hope I haven't upset you by springing my servants on you like this? It's sort of a hobby of mine, you know. Collecting items from—well, let's just call it the realm of the unseen and unearthly. Hope some day to have a specimen of every kind of creature of the sort there is. Have a long way to go, though, even if I do have all the better known ones now. But probably you've already heard of my little hobby?"

Jonas Dale, halfway through the wine, chuckled. "Certainly have, professor," he admitted. "Why I came here."

"Hm-m-m." Leem nodded. "Of course I don't know what you heard, but naturally, you understand, for reasons of my own I—ah, I rather misdirect the public knowledge of my hobby. Realizing that it would be impossible to keep it entirely a secret, I have made it an open matter. But—

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hah!—by being so frank and above-board, I have succeeded in convincing the entire county I am either a monumental liar or a magnificent joker. And you couldn't hammer a different opinion into the heads of the local inhabitants with a sledge—leaving me considerable freedom of action. But you look like a man of intelligence, so I don't mind showing off some of my collection to you. No collector, y'know, is content if he doesn't have an audience for his things occasionally."

Jonas Dale nodded and kept a straight face. The prof was a whiz of a conjurer, and could clean up on the stage. But he certainly went a long way to keep a joke going.

"Of course," Professor Leem went on, "not everyone appreciates a hobby like mine. And then again—luckily, perhaps—not everyone is capable of pursuing it. It takes a lot of preliminary study, infinite precautions, and certain special qualifications to boot. But when you're equipped for it, it's really rather fascinating. I can see you're one of those interested in it. Maybe you'd like to take a look at a few more of my items?"

Jonas Dale finished off the wine, and nodded. Leem was a right guy, with a nice taste in liquor and plenty of friendliness, but his little tricks didn't exactly leave the reporter amused. Not all the way amused, even though he laughed. They were a little too— Well, a little too— He couldn't think of the word. It didn't matter. When you wanted something from a guy, you played along with him until you got it.

"Sure," he agreed. And then, with

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bland innocence of purpose, he asked, "I suppose you've got a werewolf in your collection, too, eh, professor?"

Leem was just reaching for a box of Havanas on his desk, and he paused, a little abruptly, at the query.

"A werewolf?" he asked, staring at the news hound. "Why, no. It just happens there is no werewolf in my collection. What makes you ask?"

The reporter leaned forward. "I'm working on a story that this Jeans kid didn't die of exposure," he said bluntly. "My line is that she was killed. By a werewolf."

For a long moment Leems seemed nonplused. Then a grin replaced the momentary frown on his face. He finished getting the box of cigars and held it out.

"Have one," he invited. "Finest known. My jinni keeps me supplied. I don't ask him where they come from. But about your werewolf theory. Surely you're joking."

Jonas Dale took the cigar and bit off the end.

"Whether I'm serious isn't the point. The point is, this is superstitious country, and the kid died of exposure and *loss of blood.* Plus two little holes in her throat. I'm going to play those up into a—werewolf."

Leem nodded then. "I see." He pinched the end of his own cigar off between two sharp nails and absently put it between his lips. Then he snapped his fingers. A bright spot that seemed to be a tiny dancing flame shot instantly out of the cold fireplace across the room, flickered through the air in a dainty, delicate dance, and touched the end of his cigar. Leem inhaled, and puffed out rich blue smoke. The dancing flame shot across to the reporter's Havana.

"Light up," the professor invited. "It's my salamander—another of my items. He's a pretty creature, isn't he?

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Comes in handy, too. I also have a cockatrice. You may be familiar with them. I had a special icebox built, and keep him in the ice compartment with a large tub of water. He's blinkered so he can't see anything else. Cockatrice's, you know, turn you to stone if they look at you. This one looks at the water, and since water, naturally, turns to ice instead of stone, he keeps it frozen. Always have plenty of ice that way, and no expense to mention. Though he'd play the deuce if he ever got loose."

JONAS DALE, in spite of being momentarily startled, accepted this new trick with an equanimity that seemed to be increasing, and inhaled. His cigar took fire. At once the brilliant little creature which had lit it darted away on a zigzag course and vanished into the fireplace again.

Leem, smoke streaming from his nostrils in twin blue plumes, leaned forward. "I understand," he said, reverting to the subject. "You want a sensational story, and you've come to me for details. Maybe for help. Perhaps you'd planned to use me somehow in your yarn. That's all right with me—with my reputation in this town, anything you said about me would be taken as a joke anyway.

"But I have to disappoint you. Your ignorance of werewolves has led you astray. A werewolf, you know, is a human who periodically assumes the body of a wolf. The werewolf seeks human flesh. When it finds a victim, it devours him. Then, satiated, it returns to human form. In human form, it can not be distinguished from anyone else, save by one special stigmata which always identifies—the long forefinger. Look at your own fingers."

The reporter did so, obediently, as Leem continued speaking.

"Your first finger, you'll notice, is shorter than your second finger by about half an inch. In a werewolf, the first finger is *longer*. Generally, the fingers are slender and tapered, and the nails long and sharp, though this varies. But the long forefinger is invariable.

"However, that's beside the point. If little Alice Jeans *was* killed by an unnormal creature, it could only have been a vampire. Vampires, in case you're not familiar with them, are undead. Either they have been attacked themselves by vampires, and thus become one themselves, or a cat has jumped over their body as they lay awaiting burial, or any one of several other things may have happened. Unless they are then buried with a stake through their hearts, preferably in the center of a crossroads, they thereafter will leave their coffins if the tiniest exit remains and will seek victims among the living. These they in turn transform into vampires. If Alice Jeans was really killed by one, it'll be easy enough to find out. Just investigate her grave tonight or tomorrow night. If it's empty, you'll know."

Jonas Dale's lips twisted wryly. "Ugh!" he said, disappointment in his voice. "Well, that sort of stymies me. My paper would stand for a werewolf, but they'd draw the line at a vampire."

"I suppose so," Leem agreed. "Sorry to have upset your plans. Like to help you if I could. A vampire, incidentally, is another item that I haven't got"—he paused to reach for the wine bottle—"in my collection. For various reasons. Here, have another spot. I wouldn't think of letting you go yet. It isn't even dark."

Jonas Dale took the goblet. There was a queer lightness to his body,

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brought on by the combination of Scotch and wine, but his mind was still clear. He hadn't by any means abandoned his story—it could still be twisted to suggest that the werewolf had been driven off by the searchers before it could begin its grisly feast. But the wine was good, and there was no use hurrying away.

The tall man led him to the wide library window. "That's one of my items." The professor indicated the workman methodically mowing the lawn. He was coming toward them, and even in the half-light of sunset, Jonas Dale could see the man's blank face, unseeing eyes, gray, slack lips. "A zombie. Not a very interesting type. But handy for odd jobs around the house. Togo, my elemental, could do the work, but it's beneath his dignity.

"Now, if you'll just step in here—Oh, hello, my dear. I really didn't hear you come in."

THE REPORTER started as Professor Leem's gaze went past him, and he whirled, to confront a lovely, smiling girl and, a pace or two behind her, a stocky, tanned man of indeterminate age. The girl was about twenty-three, tall, rather pale, with a pallor that lent a curious quality of radiance to her honey-gold hair. She was smiling at them with pleasant inquiry, a smile that revealed nice teeth, a trifle long, but otherwise beyond reproach. Leem made the introduction.

"Liane, my dear, this is Mr. Dale, a newspaper reporter. Mr. Dale, my wife, Liane. Though I think you would not guess it to look at her, Mr. Dale, my wife is a rather accomplished vampire. She began her career during the French Revolution, when killed by the mob that sacked her father's manor. Subsequently her unguarded body was leaped over by a cat. When I told you earlier that I had no vampire in my collection, I was just playing safe, as I don't know whether one's wife would care to be considered a hobbist's item or not."

Liane Leem held out her hand, and her clasp was firm and hospitable. She smiled at Jonas Dale, and pouted reprovingly at her husband.

"You mustn't let Burton tease you, Mr. Dale," she said. "His taste in jokes is sometimes a little uncouth. This is Peters, Burton's confidential secretary. We've just been going over the accounts for the month."

Peters nodded affably, and Professor Leem winked at Jonas Dale.

"Peters," he said solemnly, "is part of my collection too, in a manner of speaking. Although he takes human form most of the time, he's really a demon, temporarily banished. His nether world name is Blasphoron, and he subsists almost exclusively on a diet of human souls."

"Lucky I'm a light eater," Peters said matter-of-factly. "I certainly don't get much nourishment around this house, and that's a fact."

"Now, now," Leem chided. "No complaints. Remember, the crime you're being punished for is gluttony. You're treated very well—as well as we treat ourselves. And you'll have to put up with that until your period of servitude runs out."

"Which won't be for another ten thousand years yet," Peters sighed. "Imagine, Mr. Dale, being hired out for eleven thousand, eleven hundred and eleven years, eleven months, eleven days, and eleven hours, not to count the eleven minutes and eleven seconds, just for snitching a couple of souls that were going to spoil anyway."

"I wonder if you couldn't show our

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guest your natural shape," Leem suggested, as the news hound turned a grin, manful but a little strained, from one to another of them. "It's a lulu, Mr. Dale. Wings like a bat; the body of a snake, the claws of a gargoyle, and a triple tail. Not to mention the fangs of a sea-serpent. Like nothing your worst dreams ever scared you with."

"Sorry." The secretary shook his head. "Maybe I could manage after dark, if Mr. Dale could hang around until then."

"Oh, but of course!" Liane Leem turned a ravishing smile on Jonas Dale. "He's staying for dinner, surely."

"Certainly," Professor Leem stated, as the news hound began to shake his head feebly. "I was taking that for granted. What time is dinner tonight, Liane?"

"Sundown, as usual," the girl told him. "Seven fifty-seven today. It's this daylight time makes us eat so late," she explained to the reporter. "But it won't be long now. Only twenty minutes. Excuse me until then, if you will."

She smiled, and turned. Peters, the secretary nodded, and they went out through a door that opened and closed without visible agency.

"Of course you're staying to dinner," Professor Burton Leem said bluffly, anticipating Dale's attempt to get away from there—which was the one thing he wanted to do now.

Even through the glow of the liquor, which made him still feel cheerful and almost able to appreciate his host's macabre humor, something strong and urgent was beginning to nag at him to get out of there and do it now, while the sun was still above the horizon. But the inner warning wasn't strong enough. The wine, and Leem's refusal to take no for an answer, defeated it. Obedi-

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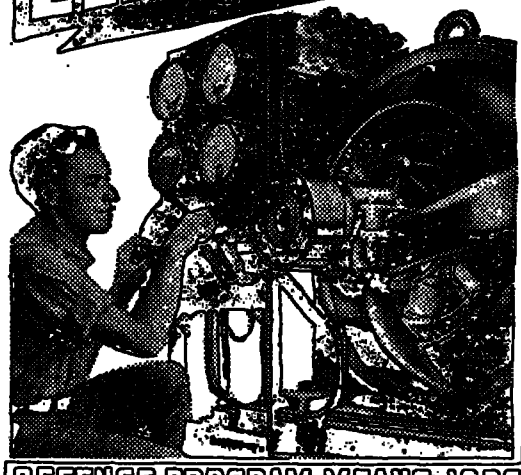

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ently the reporter followed the tall man into the next room, which they had been about to enter when the entrance of Leem's wife had interrupted them.

THIS ROOM was smaller than the library, and the floor, ceiling, and walls were curiously marked with symbols and geometrical shapes. Jonas Dale struggled to remember something he had read once about such diagrams. Pentagons—hexagons—pentacles—circles—he just couldn't bring it back. Part of the prop for the professor's jokes, of course, as were the small cages, cabinets, bottles and urns which lined tier after tier of shelves in this room.

Absently, as he noted many things and filed them away for future use, the news hawk noted that the floor of the room was stone, and sloped gently into the center, like the tiled floor of a shower bath. But he had no time to reflect on it. Leem led him to a window—one this time which commanded a view of the tennis court and a copse of woods from which a brook meandered, behind the house.

The sun was setting redly into the trees. Leem gestured toward them.

"A lot of my collection is down there," he stated. "I have a pair of trolls living there—they help look after the garden. Also a leprechaun, who's locked up most of the time to keep him out of mischief. Then there's a faun and a satyr, a wood nymph and a water nymph, a couple of elves, and a brownie. If it wasn't so late we'd run down and look them over. No one not knowing how to see them would ever know they were there, though, for they're very expert at concealing themselves.

"However, there are some nice items in this room we can amuse ourselves glancing at while we wait for sundown. Here, for instance"—he threw open the

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door to a good-sized cabinet, which on first inspection proved to be empty save for three tennis balls—"is my poltergeist. A poltergeist is an elemental, too, like Togo the butler, but less developed. They're the most usual haunters of empty houses, and their specialty is raps, knocks, lights blown out, stones thrown around—stuff like that. I've taught this one a few tricks, though. Watch."

He rapped sharply three times on the side of the cabinet. At once the three tennis balls began to move. They rose in the air, fell, rose, in the rhythmic pattern of a juggling act.

"See?" Professor Leem inquired. "He can do it with three lighted candles, too, which makes a nice parlor trick after a good dinner. He's got a use, as well. With a tennis racket he's not bad, and I often work out against him when I can't get anybody else to play with. At handball—I have a court in the basement—he's a whiz. But he cheats. Can't help it, and can't be cured of it by punishment.

"Now let's see— What would interest you next? A fairy? A standard specter—the soul-envelope that sometimes persists and is perceived as the classic sheeted ghost of fiction and fairy tale? An incubus? A succubus? A— Here's one I'd forgotten. Touissant l'Overture, my familiar. Here, Towsie, boy!"

A BLACK CAT padded into the room, stalking past the reporter with dignity, as if not seeing him at all. Jonas Dale looked down at it with dislike, and had abandoned the effort to keep a smile on his face. The joke was stale now, and had been for a long time. He didn't care for cats anyway, and this one, being bigger and blacker than most, he cared for less than usual. He wanted to get out of there and put himself outside an honest two fingers of Scotch. The wine he had drunk left him with a deadened feeling inside. But even through this a tiny voice somewhere within his brain was screaming for him to leave before that descending sun vanished finally behind the trees, which already cast purple shadows that crept toward the house like shapeless, nameless things coming to a feast.

That though, was nothing but the jitters. The professor's joke had gotten underneath Dale's skin at last. But he wasn't going to let on if he could help it, because that was probably what the prof had been trying to do all along.

"Listen, Professor Leem," Dale said, with all the calm he could muster. "I've got to be going. Honest. Got to phone the paper. Can't put it off—"

Leem laid a compelling hand on his shoulder. "Nonsense!" he boomed, his voice echoing curiously in that shelved and cabineted room. "You can't run away like this. I won't let you. It's only a matter of minutes now."

Dale turned, and the sweat was standing on his brow from the effort he made to keep his words clear and unstrained, despite the thickening of his tongue and the unnatural weakness that seemed to be clutching at his stomach.

He dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief, and his fingers were so stiff he could hardly hold the square of light linen.

"Honestly, professor," he tried to say again, hoarsely, but the tall man was talking as though he had not spoken.

"All witches have familiars, you know," he said, as the black cat squatted on its haunches a few feet away and

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turned a yellow, unwinking gaze on Dale. "Though I'm not a witch exactly, I have enough ability to bind Touissant to me. A cat, of course, serves a witch as transportation to Sabbats, and such. This broomstick business is all fallacy—Halloween stuff. Demon familiars in cat form are always used. Touissant, perhaps you'll demonstrate for Mr. Dale your powers of aërial locomotion?"

"It's not dark yet," the cat said then, unexpectedly—though Dale should have guessed what was coming, he muttered to himself. The black beast ran a tiny red tongue over its lips, still maintaining the unwinking gaze it had turned on Dale. "I can't do tricks in the daytime for you. Besides, I'm hungry. When do we eat?"

"In a couple of minutes now," Leem told it. "Don't be impatient. There's going to be plenty for all of us."

"There better be," the cat muttered, sulkily, and relapsed into silence.

Jonas Dale wiped his brow again. He was beginning to hate the suave and smiling Leem now. The man's joke was too damned effective. Trick electrical gadgets, ventriloquism, and probably dope in the wine to make a man less critical. He turned to the window. For the first time he noticed that there were slender steel bars across it, and for no reason he could think of, the discovery dismayed him.

Through the window Dale saw that the grove behind the house was shrouded in shadow now. Purple blotches had stolen almost to the house. A gory redness in the sky told that the sun was still above the horizon, but the dusk that raced across the world from the east was chasing it downward. That tiny voice inside Jonas Dale was screaming frantic warning again, and this time he was going to get out, whether he had to make a fool of himself or not to do so.

"Professor—" he began, his tongue stiff in his mouth, but Leem was looking past him.

"Ah, my dear," he said, "is it time?"

Dale spun about. Liane Leem and Peters the secretary had entered, and the door closed quietly behind them, though no human hand touched the knob. The girl smiled at them both.

"Not quite," she said, her voice clear and silvery, like the tinkle of ice in a glass. "We have about a minute to wait."

"I'm sorry." Dale forced the words out. "I can't wait. Got an important engagement. Sorry. But— Good-by!"

He shuffled, almost ran, toward the door. Behind him Leem's voice crackled.

"Oh, no, my boy!" the words were both playful and determined. "We're not letting you go now, when the time's so short. Togo—the door!"

Dale was still a stride from the door when the key twisted in the lock, then shot out from it and rose to the ceiling, beyond his reach. He grasped the knob, turned, shook the door, but the oaken portal scarcely quivered. He tried again, then desisted. The door was securely locked.

Jonas Dale turned, his back against the door, and saw the three of them grouped together near the other end of the room, gazing at him with unreadable faces. At their feet the cat still squatted, its yellow eyes still fixed on him.

Dale's breath was coming hard. He was making a fool of himself. He knew.

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If the boys on the *Clarion* ever heard how he had been buffaloed by a hick college professor with a taste for practical joking, he'd never be allowed to forget it. But that didn't matter—not now.

"Listen!" he panted. "A joke's a joke. All right, professor, you win! You've given me the heebie jeebies. I'm as jumpy as a Mexican bean. But one thing I want you to get straight. *I want to get out of here!*"

"Oh, Mr. Dale!" Liane Leem's voice was lightly chiding. "But we can't let you go now! We wouldn't dream of it!"

In the little silence that followed, Jonas Dale became aware that the room was filled with little whisperings and rustlings, squealings and mewlings and sounds not susceptible of being put into words. They seemed to come from the numerous boxes and cabinets and bottles and jars that lined the shelves in the room, and as the dimness increased they were growing louder. In the corners, shadows gathered and seemed to be crouching there, waiting.

Liane Leem was smiling a little at the reporter.

"Really, Mr. Dale," she murmured, "I do hope nothing we've done has upset you. It's true my husband likes to joke—I've scolded him for it many times. But—"

A faint chime, or a muffled gong, somewhere in the house cut across her words. She broke off what she was saying, to glance out the window, toward the darkening sky.

"Sunset!" she said, a touch of eagerness in her voice. "Sunset, Burton."

"I heard, my dear."

But Professor Burton Leem did not look at his wife as he spoke. He was looking at Jonas Dale.

"I am sorry, Mr. Dale, if I have been

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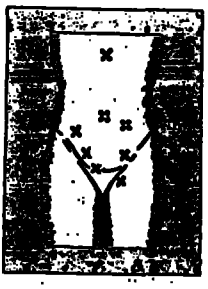
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guilty of poor taste," he said smoothly. "It is true, I do love a joke." He spread his hands, eloquently. "Sometimes I carry one to extremes. In this instance, I fear I have done so."

But the reporter scarcely heard him. His gaze was riveted on Leems' hands.

"Your finger!" Jonas Dale said, and the voice was not his, nor had he ever heard it before. Yet it came from his throat, through his lips. *"Your right forefinger is longer than your second finger!"*

"Quite so." The voice was becoming a little indistinct. "An unfailing stigmata of the werewolf, as I explained earlier. Which brings me to what I was about to say"—the voice was becoming more and more blurred—"regarding the joke I have been playing. My dear Mr. Dale, I am almost sorry to have to tell you this, but the joke is—that everything I have said this afternoon is true."

Jonas Dale looked up then, and knew what it was the frantic voice within had been inarticulately trying to tell him. He saw the change beginning. He saw why Professor Burton Leem's words were becoming so blurred. Beside Leem he saw the girl, Liane, her lips drawn back so that they were but scarlet frames for teeth that were long and white, and gleaming a little in the travesty of a smile her face still wore.

And as he saw the terrible transformation that was taking place behind them, where Peters the secretary a moment before had been standing.

Then they began to advance toward him, the three of them, with the great black cat crouched on its belly behind them, waiting. Waiting—.

And Jonas Dale, for a very little time, screamed. Quite futilely.

THE END.

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The Moving Finger Writes,

---AND HAVING WRIT---

"The meeting will come to order—"

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Three of us were talking—three of us, that is, of the Los Angeles Science and Fantasy League.

"Well, there goes one year of Unknown!" said Guy Amory, fan author, flipping through the pages of the March, 1940, issue. "And a pretty darned nice year at that, for a new magazine. Quite a record."

"You said it," Anthony Corvais put in, leaning against his stack of Unknowns.

"Well," said I, "which issue did you guys like best?"

"All of them," said Corvais. "They all had their points. Naturally, we all think that 'Sinister Barrier,' 'Slaves of Sleep' and 'The Ghoul' are the finest yet printed. But we can't neglect the smaller stories either."

"Hell, no," cried Amory. "H. L. Gold's 'Trouble With Water,' f'rinstance."

"And Mona Farnsworth's 'Who Wants Power,'" I added.

"'Divide and Rule!'" blurted Corvais. "Don't forget that one by De Camp."

"I think Robert Bloch's story about the vampire 'Cloak' was one of the finest things he's ever done," I said.

"And I think that 'Returned from Hell' was the only snag hit by Unknown in all its issues." It was Amory who spoke. We both agreed with him. "But in the June issue there were two excellent stories, one by De Camp called 'The Gnarly Man,' I believe, and Guernsey's 'The Hexer.'"

"That was a good issue," I said. "Remember Coley's 'Don't Go Haunting'? That ending knocked me for a loop."

"The July issue! Ah!" Amory picked it up and flourished it. "Containing Hubbard's 'Slaves of Sleep'! I stayed up all night finishing it. The yarn scintillated! And again L. Sprague de Camp came along with 'Nothing in the Rules'—the *tail* of a mermaid professional swimmer." He chuckled at his feeble pun and we bombarded him with insults.

"August issue of Unknown," I said. "'The Ghoul,' another thriller-diller by Hubbard. That one certainly gave us a Ron for our money!"

"Kill him!" bawled Amory, looking for his flesh-eating ghoul.

"But look!" I hurried on. "Kuttner had a story in that issue, too. 'The Misguided Halo' it was. And darned good."

Amory looked at the wall in back of me. "Isn't that the illustration from Kuttner's story there, Brad?" he asked. I nodded. "I picked it up in New York at the con-

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vention last year. Kramer did it. Those other illustrations are by Cartier and Isip."

"Cartier's work is humorous classic," Corvais put in.

"Isip is the sparkler when it comes to sweeping line and delicate work, though," said Amory. "Kramer isn't quite as good; nor Gilmore, but Wesso comes through O. K. in spots. What Unknown needs is some Rogers interiors like those for 'Divide and Rule.'"

"Let's get back to criticizing the stories," I complained. "How do we like 'None But Lucifer'?"

"Shines out like a nova," said Amory.

"I agree." Corvais glanced through the September issue. "Ray Cummings had a neat little fabrication in 'Portrait.' 'Over the Border' was a striking article, too, by Russell. Guernsey's 'Quicksand' was weird."

"October issue next," I said. "What was the best story?"

"'God in a Garden,' by Theodore Sturgeon!" was the unanimous verdict. Second: "The Elder Gods" by Stuart.

"'The Monocle' and 'The Bronze Door' in the November issue were two stories that started out nicely but fizzled," said Amory. "I was sorry to see it happen. Unknown stumbled that issue and almost fell down."

"December brought 'Johnny on the Spot,' a brief but glittering bit," Corvais remarked, squinting at the contents page. "Nice cover by Cartier, his first. Phillips' article 'Time Travel Happens' amazed me. 'Lest Darkness Fall' was one of De Camp's finest."

"I elect 'Swamp Train' as the best in January," I said. "Next place goes to A. E. Van Vogt for 'The Sea Thing.' And in February it was Hubbard's 'Death's Deputy.'"

"That winds up the first year of Unknown then," Amory said.

"How about writing down our favorite covers for the year," I suggested. So it was done. Best covers done by Cartier—December and February issues. Scott's cover for "Returned From Hell" most effective. "Sinister Barrier" cover best symbolic. November cover voted unimpressive. Best interior pics done for "The Ghoul" and "Death's Deputy" by Cartier. Welcome feature—poetry. Welcomed artist—Virgil Finlay. What we want more of: Theodore Sturgeon. Best short stories of the year in Amory's words: "The Cloak," "God in a Garden" and "Misguided Halo." Other wants—more articles. We also suggest handling of a cover by new artist Hannes Bok and perhaps one or two by Rogers. Approved whole-heartedly—the addition of the two words Fantasy Fiction to Unknown.

And the March, 1940, copy? Williamson's story starts out imposingly. "On the Knees of the Gods" comes to a finish that is faultless. Theodore Sturgeon hits the bull's-eye with his punny "Derm Fool!" We nominate it for an Academy Award. And say, why not have a Fantasy Award at the end of each year and a bonus for the winner? Isip's first cover is satisfactory, but his element is interior line.

So, into another celestial year zooms the rocket Unknown on a brilliant path of fine stories.

The Unknown broth, or should we call it soup, has been a spicy monthly meal for we readers. Keep the broth a-boiling.—The Three Fictioneers—transmitted by Ray Bradbury, Los Angeles, Calif.

Actually, Heinlein's original title was "Magic, Inc." We had to change it because "Magic" constituted part of the preceding novel, "The Mathematics of Magic." Heinlein's vocabulary of magical terms is authentic, his other words accepted colloquialisms.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I definitely enjoyed "The Devil Makes the Law," but I believe Heinlein might have chosen a more appropriate title—say, "Magic, Incorporated," for instance—as actually, it was not the Devil who made the law—except in his own Half World—but Ditworth, a pseudohuman demon.

Notwithstanding the fact that I derived great pleasure from his novel, and would be the first to welcome more of his yarns in Unknown, I am firmly of the opinion that R. Heinlein must have a wonderfully unabridged—and unique—dictionary at his disposal. Androids (p. 63), gonifs (p. 48), black and red grimoires (p. 62), and Arcane Laws (pp. 21, 62) were never in any dictionary or encyclopedia I have ever referred to. Neither were stonkered (p. 23), and apportation (p. 18)—the latter, though, might perhaps be justified as a futuristic term not thought up yet. Discommode (p. 43), a rare form of incom-

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mode, was used, and what on earth is a "goon squad" (p. 52)? Finally, mandragores and mandrakes were herbs the last I knew anything about them. So much for that.

What was it that flooded Archie Fraser's store? From Jedson's remark on page 17, I was under the impression that it was supposed to have been an undine—but an undine is a female water spirit—usually beautiful—and neither Cartier's illustration of a monster slug, nor Heinlein's unpleasant description of a rather disgusting shapeless something or other that "dripped and spread its slimy moisture to the edge of the magic ring," and "stank of fish, kelp and iodine" seemed to bear out such an idea.

Another thing. According to the theory of Paracelsus, a salamander was a being who inhabited the element fire, and did not constitute it. A different theory is that it is a mythical animal having the power to endure fire without harm—but in either case, *fire burns*. Could it be that Heinlein's specimen is a mutation?

My last criticism. Heinlein certainly picked a very novel assortment of characters to be wing commanders and the Fallen Thrones for Satan's army of demons. Let me explain:

BEEZLEBUB—I *believe* this was just a misspelling of Beelzebub, the fallen angel ranking immediately below Satan.

LEVIATHAN—This name is either a product of Heinlein's imagination, or was suggested by Thomas Hobbes' great work, "The Leviathan," which expounds his—Hobbes'—theories of government. Or it may have been taken from the Biblical leviathan, an acquatic monster.

ASHTORETH—the goddess of fertility and of sexual love. She was also regarded by the classical nations as a moon-goddess. (Not exactly the name for a *demon*. How come Heinlein overlooked Belial?)

ABADDON—Ah, Heinlein is getting warmer. Abaddon is the name of the destroying angel of the bottomless pit. (See Rev. 9:11.)

MAMMON—In Milton's "Paradise Lost," Mammon was the demon of Cupidity; in the Gospels, Mammon was a sort of personified *riches*.

THEUTUS—Heinlein seems to have been struggling with two ideas: Thetis, a Neried of Greek myth, and theurgy, a kind of occult art in which the operator may evoke the aid of beneficent spirits. Heinlein apparently compromised with himself and took a little of each. Result—Theutus.

ASMODEUS—a demon of Hebrew story who plays an important role in the book of Tobit.

INCUBUS—an evil demon supposed to

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Late comer to the fold.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Thanks again and again for a superb magazine. Hitherto I have been among that number of foolish beings who revel in showing how superior they are by despising pulp magazines. Now, I am happy to state, I am a convert and am crusading among a particular class of my friends to show the high standard of reading matter and unadulterated enjoyment that is found in Unknown.

Sprague de Camp's "Mathematics of Magic" was simply de-lovely. More of Harold Shea and Reed Chalmers. Allister Park's adventures were rather engrossing; and those of Archie in the incomparable "Devil Makes the Law" were whacky but extremely amusing. "Fear" was horribly delightful, in fact virtually all your novels were great except for a very few which broached the mediocre. The shorts tend to be definitely weak.

I am much in favor of the new frock Unknown is wearing, which won over some of my conservative friends who were afraid to be seen reading magazines with grotesque covers.

If all Unknown possessed was L. Sprague de Camp, L. Ron Hubbard and H. L. Gold, with delightfully whacky Edd Cartier to handle the illustrations, it would still keep on with no friction to clog its wheels to gather more and more readers while rolling to greater heights. By the way, I've always wondered what sort of persons de Camp and Cartier were.

I am about to read "Sinister Barrier," and hope it is what it's cracked up to be.—Eugene V. Walter, 250 E. Gun Hill Rd., The Bronx, N. Y.

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